This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

+ *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.

+ *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.

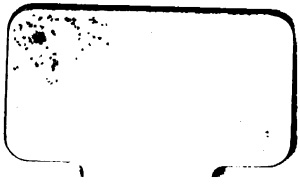
+ *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.

+ *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at `http://books.google.com/`

600055870V



RHODA FLEMING.

VOL. I.

RHODA FLEMING.

VOL. I.

LONDON:
SAVILL AND EDWARDS, PRINTERS, CHANDOS STREET,
COVENT GARDEN.

CONTENTS

OF

THE FIRST VOLUME.

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	THE KENTISH FAMILY	1
II.	QUEEN ANNE'S FARM	18
III.	SUGGESTS THE MIGHT OF THE MONEY DEMON	39
IV.	THE TEXT FROM SCRIPTURE	56
V.	THE SISTERS MEET	70
VI.	EDWARD AND ALGERNON	77
VII.	GREAT NEWS FROM DAHLIA	102
VIII.	INTRODUCES MRS. LOVELL	121
IX.	ROBERT INTERVENES	137
X.	DAHLIA IS NOT VISIBLE	155
XI.	AN INDICATIVE DUET IN A MINOR KEY	176
XII.	AT THE THEATRE	195

CHAP. PAGE
XIII. THE FARMER SPEAKS 214
XIV. BETWEEN RHODA AND ROBERT 230
XV. A VISIT TO WREXBY HALL 244
XVI. AT FAIRLY PARK 259
XVII. A YEOMAN OF THE OLD BREED 276
XVIII. AN ASSEMBLY AT THE PILOT INN . . . 297

RHODA FLEMING.

CHAPTER I.

THE KENTISH FAMILY.

Remains of our good yeomanry blood will be found in Kent; developing stiff, solid, unobtrusive men, and very personable women. The distinction survives there between Kentish women and women of Kent, as a true south-eastern dame will let you know, if it is her fortune, or her fancy, to belong to that favoured portion of the county where the great battle was fought, in which the gentler sex performed manful work, but on what luckless heads we hear not; and when garrulous tradition is discreet, the severe historic muse declines to hazard a guess. Saxon, I would presume, since it is thought something to have broken them,

and in behalf of the Cymric originals. Neither the women of Kent nor the Kentish women of our day can claim to be essentially British, and, if I am correct in my surmise, they are descendants of the vanquished. But the glory of a land is the heritage of its owners aboveground. There is no record of a remonstrance having been forwarded to them from the ancestral shades below, whereby we may conjecture hopefully that uneasiness upon the subject does not anywhere exist. Time, who equalizes all things, bestows the merit of magnificent achievements upon the sons and daughters of the earth universally; nor, I think, will anyone blame him, if he has had the courtesy to show especial consideration, in this solitary case, towards the daughters.

My plain story is of two Kentish damsels, and runs from a home of flowers into regions where flowers are few and sickly, on to where the flowers which breathe sweet breath have been proved in mortal fire.

Mrs. Fleming, of Queen Anne's Farm, was the wife of a yeoman-farmer of the county.

Both were of sound Kentish extraction, albeit varieties of the breed. The farm had its name from a tradition, common to many other farm-houses within a circuit of the metropolis, that the ante-Hanoverian lady had used the place in her day as a nursery-hospital for the royal little ones. It was a square, three-storied building of red-brick, much beaten and stained by the weather, with an ivied side, up which the ivy grew stoutly, topping the roof in triumphant lumps. The house could hardly be termed picturesque. Its aspect had struck many eyes as being very much that of a red-coat sentinel grenadier, battered with service, and standing firmly enough, though not at ease. Surrounding it was a high wall, built partly of flint and partly of brick, and ringed all over with grey lichen and brown spots of bearded moss, that bore witness to the touch of many winds and rains. Tufts of pale grass, and gilliflowers, and travelling stone-crop, hung from the wall, and driblets of ivy ran broadening to the outer ground. The royal arms were said to have once surmounted the great iron gateway; but they

and in behalf of the Cymric originals. Neither the women of Kent nor the Kentish women of our day can claim to be essentially British, and, if I am correct in my surmise, they are descendants of the vanquished. But the glory of a land is the heritage of its owners aboveground. There is no record of a remonstrance having been forwarded to them from the ancestral shades below, whereby we may conjecture hopefully that uneasiness upon the subject does not anywhere exist. Time, who equalizes all things, bestows the merit of magnificent achievements upon the sons and daughters of the earth universally; nor, I think, will anyone blame him, if he has had the courtesy to show especial consideration, in this solitary case, towards the daughters.

My plain story is of two Kentish damsels, and runs from a home of flowers into regions where flowers are few and sickly, on to where the flowers which breathe sweet breath have been proved in mortal fire.

Mrs. Fleming, of Queen Anne's Farm, was the wife of a yeoman-farmer of the county.

Both were of sound Kentish extraction, albeit varieties of the breed. The farm had its name from a tradition, common to many other farm-houses within a circuit of the metropolis, that the ante-Hanoverian lady had used the place in her day as a nursery-hospital for the royal little ones. It was a square, three-storied building of red-brick, much beaten and stained by the weather, with an ivied side, up which the ivy grew stoutly, topping the roof in triumphant lumps. The house could hardly be termed picturesque. Its aspect had struck many eyes as being very much that of a red-coat sentinel grenadier, battered with service, and standing firmly enough, though not at ease. Surrounding it was a high wall, built partly of flint and partly of brick, and ringed all over with grey lichen and brown spots of bearded moss, that bore witness to the touch of many winds and rains. Tufts of pale grass, and gilliflowers, and travelling stone-crop, hung from the wall, and driblets of ivy ran broadening to the outer ground. The royal arms were said to have once surmounted the great iron gateway; but they

had vanished, either with the family, or at the indications of an approaching rust. Rust defiled its bars; but, when you looked through them, the splendour of an unrivalled garden gave vivid signs of youth, and of the taste of an orderly, laborious, and cunning hand. The garden was under Mrs. Fleming's charge. The joy of her love for it was written on its lustrous beds, as poets write. She had the poetic passion for flowers. Perhaps her taste may now seem questionable. She cherished the old-fashioned delight in tulips; the house was reached on a gravel-path between rows of tulips, rich with one natural blush, or freaked by art. She liked a bulk of colour; and when the dahlia dawned upon our gardens, she gave her heart to dahlias. By good desert, the fervent woman gained a prize at a flower-show for one of her dahlias, and "Dahlia" was the name uttered at the christening of her eldest daughter, at which all Wrexby parish laughed as long as the joke could last. There was laughter also when Mrs. Fleming's second daughter received the name of "Rhoda;" but it did not endure for so long a space, as it

was known that she had taken more to the solitary and reflective reading of her Bible, and to thoughts upon flowers eternal. Country people are not inclined to tolerate the display of a passion for anything. They find it as intrusive and exasperating as is, in the midst of larger congregations, what we call genius. For some years, Mrs. Fleming's proceedings were simply a theme for gossips, and her vanity was openly pardoned, until that delusively prosperous appearance which her labour lent to the house, was worn through by the enforced confession of there being poverty in the household. The ragged elbow was then projected in the face of Wrexby in a manner to preclude it from a sober appreciation of the fairness of the face. Critically, moreover, her admission of great poppy-heads into her garden was objected to. She would squander her care on poppies, and she had been heard to say that, while she lived, her children should be fully fed. The encouragement of flaunting weeds in a decent garden was indicative of a moral twist that the expressed resolution to supply her table with plentiful nourishment, no matter

whence it came, or how provided, sufficiently confirmed. The reason with which she was stated to have fortified her stern resolve was of the irritating order, right in the abstract, and utterly unprincipled in the application. She said, "Good bread, and good beef, and enough of both, make good blood; and my children shall be stout." This is such a thing as may be announced by foreign princesses and rulers over serfs; but English Wrexby, in cogitative mood, demanded an equivalent for its beef, and divers economies, consumed by the hungry children of the authoritative woman. Practically, it was obedient, for it had got the habit of supplying her. Though payment was long in arrear, the arrears were not treated as lost ones by Mrs. Fleming, who, without knowing it, possessed one main secret for mastering the custodians of credit. She had a considerate remembrance and regard for the most distant of her debts, so that she seemed to be only always a little late, and exceptionally wrong-headed in theory. Wrexby, therefore, acquiesced in helping to build up her children to stoutness, and but for the blindness

of all people, save artists, poets, novelists, to the grandeur of their own creations, the inhabitants of this Kentish village might have had an enjoyable pride in the beauty and robust grace of the young girls—fair-haired, black-haired girls, a kindred contrast, like fire and smoke, to look upon. In stature, in bearing, and in expression, they were, if I may adopt the eloquent modern manner of eulogy, strikingly above their class. They carried erect shoulders, like creatures not ashamed of showing a merely animal pride, which is never quite apart from the pride of developed beauty. They were as upright as Oriental girls, whose heads are nobly poised from carrying the pitcher to the well. Dark Rhoda might have passed for Rachel, and Dahlia called her Rachel. They tossed one another their mutual compliments, drawn from the chief book of their reading. Queen of Sheba was Dahlia's title. No master of callisthenics could have set them up better than their mother's receipt for making good blood, combined with a certain harmony of thin systems, had done; nor could a schoolmistress have taught them correcter

speaking. The characteristic of girls having a disposition to rise, is to be cravingly mimetic; and they remembered, and crooned over, till by degrees they adopted the phrases and manner of speech of highly grammatical people, such as the rector and his lady, and of people in story-books, especially of the courtly French fairy-books, wherein the princes talk in periods as sweetly rounded as are their silken calves; nothing less than angelically, so as to be a model to ordinary men. The idea of love upon the lips of ordinary men, provoked Dahlia's irony; and the youths of Wrexby and Fenhurst had no chance against her secret Prince Florizels. Them she endowed with no pastoral qualities; on the contrary, she conceived that such pure young gentlemen were only to be seen, and perhaps met, in the great and mystic City of London. Naturally, the girls dreamed of London. To educate themselves, they copied out whole pages of a book called the "Field of Mars," which was next to the family Bible in size among the volumes of the farmer's small library. The deeds of the heroes of this book, and the talk of the fairy

princes, were assimilated in their minds; and as they looked around them upon millers', farmers', maltsters', and tradesmen's sons, the thought of what manner of youth would propose to marry them became a precocious tribulation. Rhoda, at the age of fifteen, was distracted by it, owing to her sister's habit of masking her own dismal, internal forebodings on the subject, under the guise of a settled anxiety concerning her sad chance. In dress, the wife of the rector of Wrexby was their model. There came once to Squire Blancove's unoccupied pew a dazzling vision of a fair lady. They heard that she was a cousin of his third wife, and a widow, Mrs. Lovell by name. They looked at her all through the service, and the lady certainly looked at them in return; nor could they, with any distinctness, imagine why, but the look dwelt long in their hearts, and often afterwards, when Dahlia, upon taking her seat in church, shut her eyes, according to custom, she strove to conjure up the image of herself, as she had appeared to the beautiful woman in the dress of grey-shot silk, with violet mantle and green bonnet, rose-

trimmed; and the picture she conceived was the one she knew herself by, for many ensuing years.

Mrs. Fleming fought her battle with a heart worthy of her countywomen, and with as much success as the burden of a despondent husband would allow to her. William John Fleming was simply a poor farmer, for whom the wheels of the world went too fast: a big man, appearing to be difficult to kill, though deeply smitten. His cheeks bloomed in spite of lines and stains, and his large, quietly-dilated, brown ox-eyes, that never gave a meaning, seldom showed as if they had taken one from what they saw. Until his wife was lost to him, he believed that he had a mighty grievance against her; but as he was not wordy, and was by nature kind, it was her comfort to die and not to know it. This grievance was rooted in the idea that she was ruinously extravagant. The sight of the plentiful table was sore to him; the hungry mouths, though he grudged to his offspring nothing that he could pay for, were an afflicting prospect. "Plump 'em up and make 'em dainty," he advanced in

contravention of his wife's talk of bread and beef. But he did not complain. If it came to an argument, the farmer sidled into a secure corner of prophecy, and bade his wife to see what would come of having dainty children. He could not deny that bread and beef made blood, and were cheaper than the port-wine which doctors were in the habit of ordering for this and that delicate young person in the neighbourhood; so he was compelled to have recourse to secret discontent. The attention, the time, and the trifles of money shed upon the flower-garden, were hardships easier to bear. He liked flowers, and he liked to hear the praise of his wife's horticultural skill. The garden was a distinguishing thing to the farm, and when on a Sunday he walked home from church among full June roses, he felt the odour of them to be so like his imagined sensations of prosperity, that the deception was worth its cost. Yet the garden in its bloom revived a cruel blow. His wife had once wounded his vanity. The massed vanity of a silent man, when it does take a wound, desires a giant's vengeance; but as one can scarcely

seek to enjoy that monstrous gratification when one's wife is the offender, the farmer escaped from his dilemma by going apart into a turnip-field, and swearing, with his fist outstretched, never to forget it. His wife had asked him, seeing that the garden flourished and the farm decayed, to yield the labour of the farm to the garden; in fact, to turn nurseryman under his wife's direction. The woman could not see that her garden drained the farm already, distracted the farm, and most evidently impoverished him. She could not understand that, in permitting her, while he sweated fruitlessly, to give herself up to the occupation of a lady, he had followed the promptings of his native kindness, and certainly not of his native wisdom. That she should deem herself "best man" of the two, and suggest his stamping his name to such an opinion before the world, was an incurable outrage. The dog will get his bone, and dulness gnaws at its grievance as greedily.

Mrs. Fleming was failing in health. On that plea, with the solemnity suited to the autumn of her allotted days, she persuaded her husband to adver-

tise for an assistant, who would pay a small sum of money to learn sound farming and hear arguments in favour of the corn laws solely. To please her, he threw seven shillings away upon an advertisement, and laughed when the advertisement was answered, remarking that he doubted much whether good would come of dealings with strangers. A young man, calling himself Robert Armstrong, underwent a presentation to the family. He paid the stipulated sum, and was soon enrolled as one of them. He was of a guardsman's height and a cricketer's suppleness, a drinker of water, and apparently the victim of a dislike of his species; for he spoke of the great night-lighted city with a horror that did not seem to be an estimable point in him, as judged by a pair of damsels for whom the mysterious metropolis flew with fiery fringes through dark space, in their dreams. In other respects, the stranger was well thought of, as being handsome and sedate. He talked fondly of one friend that he had, an officer in the army, which was considered pardonably vain. He did not reach to the ideal of his sex which had been formed by the sisters;

but Mrs. Fleming, trusting to her divination of his sex's character, whispered a mother's word about him to her husband a little while before her death.

It was her prayer to Heaven, that she might save a doctor's bill. She died, without lingering illness, in her own beloved month of June; the roses of her tending at the open window, and a soft breath floating up to her from the garden. On the foregoing May-day, she had sat on the green that fronted the iron gateway, when Dahlia and Rhoda dressed the children of the village in garlands, and crowned the fairest little one queen of May: a sight that revived in Mrs. Fleming's recollection the time of her own eldest and fairest taking homage, shy in her white smock and light thick curls. The gathering was large, and the day was of the old nature of May, before tyrannous east-winds had captured it and spoiled its consecration. The mill-stream of the neighbouring mill ran blue among the broad green pastures; the air smelt of cream-bowls and wheaten loaves; the firs on the beacon-ridge, far southward, over Fenhurst and Helm villages, were

transported nearer to see the show, and stood like friends anxious to renew acquaintance. Dahlia and Rhoda taught the children to perceive how they resembled bent old beggarmen. The two stone-pines in the miller's grounds were likened by them to Adam and Eve turning away from the blaze of Paradise; and the saying of one receptive child, that they had nothing but hair on, made the illustration undying both to Dahlia and Rhoda. The magic of the weather brought numerous butterflies afield and one fiddler, to whose tuning the little women danced; others closer upon womanhood would have danced likewise, if the sisters had taken partners; but Dahlia was restrained by the sudden consciousness that she was under the immediate observation of two manifestly London gentlemen, and she declined to be led forth by Robert Armstrong. The intruders were youths of good countenance, known to be the son and the nephew of Squire Blancove of Wrexby Hall. They remained for some time watching the scene, and destroyed Dahlia's single-mindedness. Like many days of gaiety, the gods consenting, this one had its

human shadow. There appeared on the borders of the festivity a young woman, the daughter of a Wrexby cottager, who had left her home and but lately returned it, with a spotted name. No one addressed her, and she stood humbly apart. Dahlia, seeing that every one moved away from her, whispering with satisfied noddings, wished to draw her in among the groups. She mentioned the name of Mary Burt to her father, supposing that so kind a man would not fail to sanction her going up to the neglected young woman. To her surprise, her father became violently enraged, and uttered a stern prohibition, speaking a word that stained her cheeks. Rhoda was by her side, and she wilfully, without asking leave, went straight over towards Mary, and stood with her under the shadow of the Adam and Eve, until the farmer sent a messenger to say that he was about to enter the house. Her punishment for the act of sinfulness was a week of severe silence; and the farmer would have kept her to it longer, but for her mother's ominously growing weakness. The sisters were strangely overclouded by this incident. They could not

fathom the meaning of their father's unkindness, coarseness, and indignation. Why, and why? they asked one another, blankly. The Scriptures were harsh in one part, but was the teaching to continue so after the atonement? By degrees they came to reflect, and not in a mild spirit, that the kindest of men can be cruel, and will forget their Christianity towards offending and repentant women.

CHAPTER II.

QUEEN ANNE'S FARM.

Mrs. Fleming had a brother in London, who had run away from his Kentish home when a small boy, and found refuge at a bank. The position of Anthony Hackbut in that celebrated establishment, and the degree of influence exercised by him there, were things unknown; but he had stuck to the bank for a great number of years, and he had once confessed to his sister that he was not a beggar. Upon these joint facts the farmer speculated, deducing from them that a man in a London bank, holding money of his own, must have learnt the ways of turning it over—farming golden ground, as it were; consequently, that amount must now have increased to a very considerable sum. You ask, What amount? But one who sits brooding upon a

pair of facts for years, with the imperturbable gravity of creation upon chaos, will be as successful in evoking the concrete from the abstract. The farmer saw round figures among the possessions of the family, and he assisted mentally in this money-turning of Anthony's, counted his gains for him, disposed his risks, and eyed the pile of visionary gold with an interest so remote, that he was almost correct in calling it disinterested. The brothers-in-law had a mutual plea of expense that kept them separate. When Anthony refused, on petition, to advance one hundred pounds to the farmer, there was ill blood to divide them. Queen Anne's Farm missed the flourishing point by one hundred pounds exactly. With that addition to its exchequer, it would have made head against its old enemy, Taxation, and started rejuvenescent. But the Radicals were in power to legislate and crush agriculture, and "I've got a miser for my brother-in-law," said the farmer. Alas! the hundred pounds to back him, he could have sowed what he pleased, and when it pleased him, partially defying the capricious clouds and their treasures,

and playing tunefully upon his land, his own land. Instead of which, and while too keenly aware that the one hundred would have made excesses in any direction tributary to his pocket, the poor man groaned at continuous falls of moisture, and when rain was prayed for in church, he had to be down on his knees, praying heartily with the rest of the congregation. It was done, and bitter reproaches were cast upon Anthony for the enforced necessity to do it.

On the occasion of his sister's death, Anthony informed his bereaved brother-in-law that he could not come down to follow the hearse as a mourner. "My place is one of great trust," he said, "and I cannot be spared." He offered, however, voluntarily to pay half the expenses of the funeral, stating the limit of the cost. It is unfair to sound any man's springs of action critically while he is being tried by a sorrow; and the farmer's angry rejection of Anthony's offer of aid must pass. He remarked in his letter of reply, that his wife's funeral should cost no less than he chose to expend on it. He breathed indignant fumes against "inter-

ferences." He desired Anthony to know that he also was "not a beggar," and that he would not be treated as one. The letter showed a solid yeoman's fist. Farmer Fleming told his chums, and the shopkeeper of Wrexby, with whom he came into converse, that he would honour his dead wife up to his last penny. Some month or so afterwards it was generally conjectured that he had kept his word.

Anthony's rejoinder was characterized by a marked humility. He expressed contrition for the farmer's misunderstanding of his motives. His fathomless conscience had plainly been reached. He wrote again, without waiting for an answer, speaking of the funds indeed, but only to pronounce them worldly things, and hoping that they all might meet in heaven, where brotherly love, as well as money, was ready made, and not always in the next street. A hint occurred that it would be a gratification to him to be invited down, whether he could come or no; for holidays were expensive, and journeys by rail had to be thought over before they were undertaken; and when you are away from your

post, you never knew who might be supplanting you. He did not promise that he could come, but frankly stated his susceptibility to the friendliness of an invitation. The feeling indulged by farmer Fleming in refusing to notice Anthony's advance towards a reconciliation, was, on the whole, not creditable to him. Spite is more often fattened than propitiated by penitence. He may have thought besides (policy not being always a vacant space in revengeful acts) that Anthony was capable of something stronger and warmer, now that his humanity had been aroused. The speculation is commonly perilous; but farmer Fleming had the desperation of a man who has run slightly into debt, and has heard the first din of dunning, which to the unaccustomed imagination is fearful as bankruptcy (shorn of the horror of the word). And, moreover, it was so wonderful to find Anthony displaying humanity at all, that anything might be expected of him. "Let's see what he *will* do," thought the farmer in an interval of his wrath; and the wrath is very new which has none of these cool intervals.

The passions, do but watch them, are all more or less intermittent.

As it chanced, he acted sagaciously, for Anthony at last wrote to say that his home in London was cheerless, and that he intended to move into fresh and airier lodgings, where the presence of a discreet young housekeeper, who might wish to see London, and make acquaintance with the world, would be agreeable to him. His project was that one of his nieces should fill this office, and he requested his brother-in-law to reflect on it, and to think of him as of a friend of the family, now and in the time to come. Anthony spoke of the seductions of London quite unctuously. Who could imagine this to be the letter of an old crabbed miser? "Tell her," he said, "there's fruit at stalls at every street-corner all the year through—oysters and whelks, if she likes—winkles, lots of pictures in shops—a sight of muslin and silks, and rides on omnibuses—bands of all sorts, and now and then we can take a walk to see the military on horseback, if she's for soldiers." Indeed, he joked quite comically in speaking of the famous horse-

guards—warriors who sit on their horses to be looked at, and do not mind it, because they are trained so thoroughly. "Horse-guards blue, and horse-guards red," he wrote—"the blue only want boiling." There is reason to suppose that his disrespectful joke was not original to him, but it displayed his character in a fresh light. Of course, if either of the girls was to go, Dahlia was the person. The farmer commenced his usual process of sitting upon the idea. That it would be policy to attach one of the family to this chirping old miser, he thought incontestable. On the other hand, he had a dread of London, and Dahlia was surpassingly fair. He put the case to Robert, in remembrance of what his wife had spoken, hoping that Robert would amorously stop his painful efforts to think fast enough for the occasion. Robert, however, had nothing to say, and seemed willing to let Dahlia depart. The only opponents to the plan were Mrs. Sumfit, a kindly, humble relative of the farmer's, widowed out of Sussex, very loving and fat; the cook to the household, whose waist was dimly indicated by her apron-string; and, to aid her out-

cries, the silently-protesting Master Gammon, an old man with the cast of eye of an antediluvian lizard, the slowest old man of his time—a sort of foreman of the farm before Robert had come to take matters in hand, and thrust both him and his master into the background. Master Gammon remarked emphatically, once and for all, that "he never had much opinion of London." As he had never visited London, his opinion was considered the less weighty, but, as he advanced no further speech, the sins and backslidings of the metropolis were strongly brought to mind by his condemnatory utterance. Policy and Dahlia's entreaties at last prevailed with the farmer, and so the fair girl went up to the great city.

After months of a division that was like the division of her living veins, and when the comfort of letters was getting cold, Rhoda having previously pledged herself to secrecy, though she could not guess why it was commanded, received a miniature portrait of Dahlia, so beautiful that her envy of London for holding her sister away from her, melted in gratitude. She had permission to keep the portrait a week; it was im-

possible to forbear from showing it to Mrs. Sumfit, who peeped in awe, and that emotion subsiding, shed tears abundantly. Why it was to be kept secret, they failed to inquire; the mystery was possibly not without its delights to them. Tears were shed again when the portrait had to be packed up and despatched. Rhoda lived on abashed by the adorable new refinement of Dahlia's features, and her heart yearned to her uncle for so caring to decorate the lovely face.

One day Rhoda was at her bed-room window, on the point of descending to encounter the daily dumpling, which was the principal and the unvarying item of the midday meal of the house, when she beheld a stranger trying to turn the handle of the iron gate. Her heart thumped. She divined correctly that it was her uncle. Dahlia had now been absent for very many months, and Rhoda's growing fretfulness sprung the conviction in her mind that something closer than letters must soon be coming. She ran downstairs, and along the gravel-path. He was a little man, square-built,

and looking as if he had worn to toughness; with an evident Sunday suit on: black, and black gloves, though the day was only antecedent to Sunday.

"Let me help you, sir," she said, and her hands came in contact with his, and were squeezed.

"How is my sister?" She had no longer any fear in asking.

"Now, you let me through, first," he replied, imitating an arbitrary juvenile. "You're as tight locked in as if you was in dread of all the thieves of London. You ain't afraid o' me, miss? I'm not the party generally outside of a fortification; I ain't, I can assure you. I'm a defence party, and a reg'lar lion when I've got the law backing me. Just so t'other way. I'm a cur, my dear, at the bare thoughts of what I could be, was I——was I—— and there I am, I'm—that I am!—if I knew where."

He spoke in a queer, wheezy voice, like a cracked flute combined with the effect of an ill-resined fiddle-bow.

"You are in the garden of Queen Anne's Farm," said Rhoda.

"And you're my pretty little niece, are you? 'the darkie lass,' as your father says. 'Little,' says I; why, you needn't be ashamed to stand beside a grenadier. Trust the country for growing fine gals."

"You are my uncle, then?" said Rhoda. "Tell me how my sister is. Is she well? Is she quite happy?"

"Dahly?" returned old Anthony, slowly.

"Yes, yes; my sister!" Rhoda looked at him with distressful eagerness.

"Now, don't you be uneasy about your sister Dahly." Old Anthony, as he spoke, fixed his small brown eyes on the girl, and seemed immediately to have departed far away in speculation. A question recalled him.

"Is her health good?"

"Ay; stomach's good, head's good, lungs, brain, what not, all good. She's a bit giddy, that's all."

"In her head?"

"Ay; and on her pins. Never you mind.

You look a steady one, my dear. I shall take to you, I think."

"But my sister——" Rhoda was saying, when the farmer came out, and sent a greeting from the threshold—

"Brother Tony!"

"Here he is, brother William John."

"Surely, and so he is, at last." The farmer walked up to him with his hand out.

"And it ain't too late, I hope. Eh?"

"It's never too late—to mend," said the farmer.

"Eh? not my manners, eh?" Anthony struggled to keep up the ball; and in this way they got over the confusion of the meeting after many years and some differences.

"Made acquaintance with Rhoda, I see," said the farmer, as they turned to go in.

"The 'darkie lass' you write of. She's like a coal nigh a candle. She looks, as you'd say, 't'other side of her sister.' Yes, we've had a talk."

"Just in time for dinner, brother Tony. We ain't got much to offer, but what there

is, is at your service. Step aside with me."

The farmer got Anthony out of hearing a moment, questioned, and was answered; after which he looked less anxious but a trifle perplexed, and nodded his head as Anthony occasionally lifted his, to enforce certain points in some halting explanation. You would have said that a debtor was humbly putting his case in his creditor's ear, and could only now and then summons courage to meet the censorious eyes. They went in to Mrs. Sumfit's shout that the dumplings were out of the pot; old Anthony bowed upon the announcement of his name, and all took seats. But it was not the same sort of dinner-hour as that which the inhabitants of the house were accustomed to; there was conversation.

The farmer asked Anthony by what conveyance he had come. Anthony shyly, but not without evident self-approbation, related how, having come by the train, he got into conversation with the driver of a fly at a station, who advised him of a cart that would be passing near

Wrexby. For threepennyworth of beer, he had got a friendly introduction to the carman, who took him within two miles of the farm for one shilling, a distance of fifteen miles. That was pretty good!

"Home pork, brother Tony," said the farmer, approvingly.

"And home-made bread, too, brother William John," said Anthony, becoming brisk.

"Ay, and the beer, such as it is." The farmer drank and sighed.

Anthony tried the beer, remarking—"That's good beer; it don't cost much."

"It ain't adulterated. By what I read of your London beer, this stuff's not so bad, if you bear in mind it's pure. Pure's my motto. 'Pure, though poor!'"

"Up there, you pay for rank poison," said Anthony. "So, what do I do? I drink water and thank'em, that's wise."

"Saves stomach and purse." The farmer put a little stress on "purse."

"Yes, I calculate I save threepence a day in beer alone," said Anthony.

"Three times seven's twenty-one, ain't it?"

Mr. Fleming said this, and let out his elbow in a small perplexity, as Anthony took him up:—"And fifty-two times twenty-one?"

"Well, that's, that's—how much is that, Mas' Gammon?" the farmer asked in a bellow.

Master Gammon was laboriously and steadily engaged in tightening himself with dumpling. He relaxed his exertions sufficiently to take this new burden on his brain, and immediately cast it off.

"A never thinks when I feeds—A was al'ays a bad hand at 'counts. Gi'es it up."

"Why, you're like a horse that never was rode! Try again, old man," said the farmer.

"If I drags a cart," Master Gammon replied, "that ain't no reason why I should leap a gate."

The farmer felt that he was worsted as regarded the illustration, and with a bit of the boy's fear of the pedagogue, he fought Anthony off by still pressing the arithmetical problem upon Master Gammon, until the old man, goaded to exasperation, rolled out thunderingly—

"If I works fer ye, that ain't no reason why

I should think fer ye," which seemed conclusive, and caused him to be left in peace.

"Eh, Robert?" the farmer transferred the question; "Come! what is it?"

Robert begged a minute's delay, while Anthony watched him with hawk eyes.

"I tell you what it is—it's pounds," said Robert.

This tickled Anthony, who let him escape, crying: "Capital! Pounds it is in your pocket, sir, and you hit that neatly, I will say. Let it be five. You out with your five at interest, compound interest; soon comes another five; treat it the same: in ten years—eh? and then you get into figures; you swim in figures!"

"I should think you did!" said the farmer, winking slyly.

Anthony caught the smile, hesitated and looked shrewd, and then covered his confusion by holding his plate to Mrs. Sumfit for a help. The manifest evasion and mute declaration that dumpling said "mum" on that head, gave the farmer a quiet glow.

"When you are ready to tell me all about

my darlin', sir," Mrs. Sumfit suggested coaxingly.

"After dinner, mother, after dinner," said the farmer.

"And we're waitin', are we, till them dumplings is finished?" she exclaimed, piteously, with a glance at Master Gammon's plate.

"After dinner we'll have a talk, mother."

Mrs. Sumfit feared from this delay that there was queer news to be told of Dahlia's temper; but she longed for the narrative no whit the less, and again cast a sad eye on the leisurely proceedings of Master Gammon. The veteran was still calmly tightening. His fork was on end, with a vast mouthful impaled on the prongs. Master Gammon, a thoughtful eater, was always last at the meal, and a latent, deep-lying irritation at Mrs. Sumfit for her fidgetiness, day after day, towards the finish of the dish, added a relish to his engulphing of the monstrous morsel. He looked at her steadily, like an ox of the fields, and consumed it, and then holding his plate out, in a remorseless way, said, "You makes 'em so good, Marm."

Mrs. Sumfit, fretted as she was, was not impervious to the sound sense of the remark, as well as to the compliment.

"I don't want to hurry you, Mas' Gammon," she said; "Lord knows, I like to see you and everybody eat his full and be thankful; but, all about my Dahly waitin',—I feel pricked wi' a pin all over, I do; and there's my blessed in London," she answered, "and we knowin' nothin' of her, and one close by to tell me! I never did feel what slow things dumplin's was, afore now!"

The kettle simmered gently on the hob. Every other knife and fork was silent; so was every tongue. Master Gammon ate and the kettle hummed. Twice Mrs. Sumfit sounded a despairing, "Oh, dear me!" but it was useless. No human power had ever yet driven Master Gammon to a demonstration of haste or to any acceleration of the pace he had chosen for himself. At last, she was not to be restrained from crying out, almost tearfully:

"When *do* you think you'll have done, Mas' Gammon?"

Thus pointedly addressed, Master Gammon laid down his knife and fork. He half raised his ponderous, curtaining eyelids, and replied:

"When I feels my buttons, Marm."

After which he deliberately fell to work again.

Mrs. Sumfit dropped back in her chair as from a mortal blow.

But even dumplings, though they resist so doggedly for a time, do ultimately submit to the majestic march of Time, and move. Master Gammon cleared his plate. There stood in the dish still half a dumpling. The farmer and Rhoda, deeming that there had been a show of inhospitality, pressed him to make away with this forlorn remainder.

The vindictive old man, who was as tight as dumpling and buttons could make him, refused it in a drooping tone, and went forth, looking at none. Mrs. Sumfit turned to all parties, and begged them to say what more, to please Master Gammon, she could have done? When Anthony was ready to speak of her Dahlia, she obtruded this question in utter dolefulness. Robert was kindly asked by the farmer to take a pipe among

them. Rhoda put a chair for him, but he thanked them both, and said, he could not neglect some work to be done in the fields. She thought that he feared pain from hearing Dahlia's name, and followed him with her eyes commiseratingly.

"Does that young fellow attend to business?" said Anthony.

The farmer praised Robert as a rare hand, but one afflicted with bees in his nightcap; who had ideas of his own about farming, and was obstinate with them; "pays you due respect, but's got a notion as how his way of thinking's better'n his seniors. It's the style now with all young folks. Makes a butt of old Mas' Gammon; laughs at the old man. It ain't respectful t' age, I say. Gammon don't understand nothing about new feeds for sheep, and dam nonsense about growing such things as melons, fiddle-faddle, for 'em. Robert's a beginner. What he knows, I taught the young fellow. Then, my question is, where's his ideas come from, if they're contrary to mine? If they're contrary to mine, they're contrary to my

teaching. Well, then, what are they worth? He can't see that. He's a good one at work, I'll say so much for him."

Old Anthony gave Rhoda a pat on the shoulder.

CHAPTER III.

SUGGESTS THE MIGHT OF THE MONEY DEMON.

"Pipes in the middle of the day's regular revelry," ejaculated Anthony, whose way of holding the curved pipe-stem displayed a mind bent on reckless enjoyment, and said as much as a label issuing from his mouth, like a figure in a comic wood-cut of the old style:—"that's," he pursued, "that's if you haven't got to look up at the clock every two minutes, as if the devil was after you. But, sitting here, you know, the afternoon's a long evening; nobody's your master. You can on wi' your slippers, up wi' your legs, talk, or go for'ard, counting, twicing, and three-timesing; by George! I should take to drinking beer if I had my afternoons to myself in the city, just for the sake of sitting and doing sums in a tap-room; if it's a big tap-room, with pew

sort o' places, and dark red curtains, a fire, and a smell of sawdust, ale, and tobacco, and a boy going by outside whistling a tune of the day. Somebody comes in. 'Ah, there's an idle old chap,' he says to himself, (meaning me), and where, I should like to ask him, 'd his head be if he sat there, dividing two hundred and fifty thousand by forty-five and a half!"

The farmer nodded encouragingly. He thought it not improbable that a short operation with these numbers would give the sum in Anthony's possession, and the exact calculation of his secret hoard, and he set to work to stamp them on his brain, which rendered him absent in manner, while Mrs. Sumfit mixed liquor with hot water, and pushed at his knee, doubling her enduring lips in, and lengthening her eyes to aim a side-glance of reprehension at Anthony's wandering loquacity.

Rhoda could bear it no more.

"Now let me hear of my sister, uncle," she said.

"I'll tell you what," Anthony responded, "she hasn't got such a pretty sort of a sweet blackbirdy voice as you've got."

The girl blushed scarlet.

"Oh, she can mount them colours, too," said Anthony.

His way of speaking of Dahlia indicated that he and she had had enough of one another; but of the peculiar object of his extraordinary visit not even the farmer had received a hint. Mrs. Sumfit ventured to think aloud that his grog was not stiff enough, but he took a gulp under her eyes, and smacked his lips after it in a most convincing manner.

"Ah! that stuff wouldn't do for me in London, half-holiday or no half-holiday," said Anthony.

"Why not?" the farmer asked.

"I should be speculating—deep—couldn't hold myself in:—Mexicans, Peroovians, Venzeshoolians, Spaniards, at 'em I should go. I see bonds in all sorts of colours, Spaniards in black and white, Peruvians—orange, Mexicans—red as the British army. Well, it's just my whim. If I like red, I go at red. I ain't a bit of reason. What's more, I never speculate."

"Why, that's safest, brother Tony," said the farmer.

"And safe's my game—always was, always will be! Do you think"—Anthony sucked his grog to the sugar-dregs, till the spoon settled on his nose—"do you think I should hold the position I do hold, be trusted as I am trusted? Ah! you don't know much about that—should I have money placed in my hands, do you think—and it's thousands at a time, gold, and notes, and cheques—if I was a risky chap? I'm known to be thoroughly respectable. Five and forty years I've been in Boyne's bank, and, thank ye, ma'am, grog don't do no harm down here. And I *will* take another glass. 'When the heart of a man!'—but I'm no singer."

Mrs. Sumfit simpered, "Hem; it's the heart of a woman, too: and she have one, and it's dying to hear of her darlin' blessed in town, and of who cuts her hair, and where she gets her gownds, and whose pills——"

The farmer interrupted her irritably.

"Divide a couple o' hundred thousand and more by forty-five and a half," he said. "Do

wait, mother; all in good time. Forty-five and a-half, brother Tony; that was your sum—ah! —you mentioned it some time back—half of what? Is that half a fraction, as they call it? I haven't forgot fractions, and logareems, and practice, and so on to algebrae, where it always seems to me to blow hard, for, whizz goes my head in a jiffy, as soon as I've mounted the ladder to look into that country. How 'bout that forty-five and a *half*, brother Tony, if you don't mind condescending to explain?"

"Forty-five and a half?" muttered Anthony, mystified.

"Oh, never mind, you know, if you don't like to say, brother Tony." The farmer touched him up with his pipe-stem.

"Five and a half," Anthony speculated. "That's a fraction you got hold of, brother William John:—I remember the parson calling out those names at your wedding: 'I, William John, take thee, Susan:' yes, that's a fraction, but what's the good of it?"

"What I mean is, it ain't forty-five and half of forty-five. Half of *one*, eh? That's identical

with a fraction. One—a stroke—and two under it."

"You've got it correct," Anthony assented.

"How many thousand divide it by?"

"Divide *what* by, brother William John? I'm beat,"

"Ah! out comes the keys: lock up everything: it's time!" the farmer laughed, rather proud of his brother-in-law's perfect wakefulness after two stiff tumblers. He saw that Anthony was determined with all due friendly feeling to let no one know the sum in his possession.

"If it's four o'clock, it *is* time to lock up," said Anthony, "and bang to go the doors, and there's the money for thieves to dream of—they can't get a-nigh it, let them dream as they like. What's the hour, ma'am?"

"Not three, it ain't," returned Mrs. Sumfit, "and do be good creatures, and begin about my Dahly, and where she got that sumptious gownd, and the bonnet with blue flowers lyin' by on the table: now, do!"

Rhoda coughed.

"And she wears lavender gloves like a lady," Mrs. Sumfit was continuing.

Rhoda stamped on her foot.

"Oh! cruel!" the comfortable old woman snapped in pain, as she applied her hand to the inconsolable fat foot, and nursed it. "What's roused ye, you tiger girl? I shan't be able to get about, I shan't, and then who's to cook for ye all? For you're as ignorant as a raw kitchen wench, and knows nothing."

"Come, Dody, you're careless," the farmer spoke chidingly through Mrs. Sumfit's lamentations.

"She stops uncle Anthony when he's just ready, father," said Rhoda.

"Do you want to know?" Anthony set his small eyes on her: "do you want to know, my dear?" He paused, fingering his glass, and went on: "I, Susan, take thee William John, and you've come of it, says I to myself when I hung sheepish by your mother and by your father, my dear, says I to myself, I ain't a marrying man: and if these two, says I, if any

progeny comes to 'em—to bless them, some people 'd say, but I know what life is, and what young ones are—if—where was I? Liquor makes you talk, brother William John, but where's your ideas? Gone, like hard cash! What I meant was, I felt I might some day come for'ard and help the issue of your wife's weddin', and wasn't such a shady object among you, after all. My pipe's out."

Rhoda stood up and filled the pipe, and lit it in silence. She divined that the old man must be allowed to run on in his own way, and for a long time he rambled, gave a picture of the wedding, and of a robbery of Boyne's Bank: the firm of Boyne, Birt, Hamble, and Company. At last, he touched on Dahlia.

"What she *wants*, I can't make out," he said; "and what that good lady there, or somebody, made mention of—how she manages to dress as she do! I can understand a little goin' a great way, if you're clever in any way; but I'm at my tea:" Anthony laid his hand out as to exhibit a picture. "I ain't a complaining man, and be young, if you can, I say, and walk

about and look at shops; but, I'm at my tea: I come home rather tired: there's the tea-things, sure enough, and tea's made, and, may be, there's a shrimp or two; she attends to your creature comforts. When everything's locked up and tight and right, I'm gay, and ask for a bit of society: well, I'm at my tea: I hear her foot thumping up and down her bed-room overhead: I know the meaning of *that:* I'd rather hear nothing: down she runs: I'm at my tea, and in she bursts."—Here followed a dramatic account of Dahlia's manner of provocation, which was closed by the extinction of his pipe.

The farmer, while his mind still hung about thousands of pounds and a certain incomprehensible division of them to produce a distinct intelligible total, and set before him the sum of Anthony's riches, could see that his elder daughter was behaving flightily and neglecting the true interests of the family, and he was chagrined. But Anthony, before he entered the house, had assured him that Dahlia was well, and that nothing was wrong with her. So he looked at Mrs. Sumfit, who now took

upon herself to plead for Dahlia: a young thing, and such a handsome creature! and we were all young some time or other: and would Heaven have mercy on us, if we were hard upon the young, do you think? The motto of a truly religious man said, try 'em again. And, may be, people had been a little hard upon Dahlia, and the girl was apt to take offence. In conclusion, she appealed to Rhoda to speak up for her sister. Rhoda sat in quiet reserve.

She was sure her sister must be justified in all she did: but the picture of the old man coming from his work every night to take his tea quite alone made her sad. She found herself unable to speak, and as she did not, Mrs. Sumfit had an acute twinge from her recently trodden foot, and called her some bitter names; which was not an unusual case, for the kind old woman could be querulous, and belonged to the list of those whose hearts are as scales, so that they love not one person devotedly without a corresponding spirit of opposition to another. Rhoda merely smiled.

By-and-by, the women left the two men alone.

Anthony turned and struck the farmer's knee.

"You've got a jewel in *that* gal, brother William John."

"Eh! she's a good enough lass. Not much of a manager, brother Tony. Too much of a thinker, I reckon. She's got a temper of her own too. I'm a bit hurt, brother Tony, about that other girl. She must leave London, if she don't alter. It's flightiness; that's all. You musn't think ill of poor Dahly. She was always the pretty one, and when they know it, they act up to it: she was her mother's favourite."

"Ah! poor Susan! an upright woman before the Lord."

"She was," said the farmer, bowing his head.

"And a good wife," Anthony interjected.

"None better—never a better; and I wish she was living to look after her girls."

"I came through the churchyard, hard by," said Anthony; "and I read that writing on her tombstone. It went like a choke in my throat. The first person I saw next was her child, this young gal you call Rhoda; and, thinks I to my-

self, you might ask me, I'd do anything for ye—that I could, of course."

The farmer's eye had lit up, but became overshadowed by the characteristic reservation.

"Nobody'd ask you to do more than you could," he remarked, rather coldly.

"It'll never be much," sighed Anthony.

"Well, the world's nothing, if you come to look at it close." The farmer adopted a similar tone.

"What's money?" said Anthony.

The farmer immediately resumed his this-worldliness:—

"Well, it's fine to go about asking us poor devils to answer ye *that*," he said, and chuckled, conceiving that he had nailed Anthony down to a partial confession of his ownership of some worldly goods.

"What do you call having money?" observed the latter clearly in the trap. "Fifty thousand?"

"Whew!" went the farmer, as at a big draught of powerful stuff.

"Ten thousand?"

Mr. Fleming took this second gulp almost contemptuously, but still kindly.

"Come," quoth Anthony, "ten thousand's not so mean, you know. You're a gentleman on ten thousand. So, on five. I'll tell ye, many a gentleman 'd be glad to own it. Lor' bless you! But, you know nothing of the world, brother William John. Some of 'em haven't one—ain't so rich as you!"

"Or *you*, brother Tony?" The farmer made a grasp at his will-o'-the-wisp.

"Oh! me!" Anthony sniggered. "I'm a scraper of odds and ends. I pick up things in the gutter. Mind you, those Jews ain't such fools, though a curse is on 'em, to wander forth. They know the meaning of the multiplication table. *They* can turn fractions into whole numbers. No; I'm not to be compared to gentlemen. My property 's my respectability. I said that at the beginning, and I say it now. But, I'll tell you what, brother William John, it's an emotion when you've got bags of thousands of pounds in your arms."

Ordinarily, the farmer was a sensible man, as

straight on the level of dull intelligence as other men; but so credulous was he in regard to the riches possessed by his wife's brother, that a very little tempted him to childish exaggeration of the probable amount. Now that Anthony himself furnished the incitement, he was quite lifted from the earth. He had, besides, taken more of the strong mixture than he was ever accustomed to take in the middle of the day; and as it seemed to him that Anthony was really about to be seduced into a particular statement of the extent of the property which formed his respectability (as Anthony had chosen to put it), he got up a little game in his head by guessing how much the amount might positively be, so that he could subsequently compare his shrewd reckoning with the avowed fact. He tamed his wild ideas as much as possible; thought over what his wife used to say of Anthony's saving ways from boyhood, thought of the dark hints of the Funds, of many bold strokes for money made by sagacious persons; of Anthony's close style of living, and of the lives of celebrated misers; this done, he resolved to make a sure guess, and therefore

aimed below the mark. Money, when the imagination deals with it thus, has no substantial relation to mortal affairs. It is a tricksy thing, distending and contracting as it dances in the mind, like sunlight on the ceiling cast from a morning tea-cup, if a forced simile will aid the conception. The farmer struck on thirty thousand and some odd hundred pounds—outlying debts, or so, excluded—as what Anthony's will, in all likelihood, would be sworn under—say, thirty thousand, or, safer, say, twenty thousand. Bequeathed—how? To him and to his children. But to the children in reversion after his decease? Or how? In any case, they might make capital marriages; and the farm estate should go to whichever of the two young husbands he liked the best. Farmer Fleming asked not for any life of ease and splendour, though thirty thousand pounds was a fortune; or even twenty thousand. Noblemen have stooped to marry heiresses owning no more than that! The idea of their having done so actually shot across him, and his heart sent up a warm spring of tenderness towards the patient, good, grubbing

old fellow, sitting beside him, who had lived and died to enrich and elevate the family. At the same time, he could not refrain from thinking that Anthony, broad-shouldered as he was, though bent, sound in his legs, and well-coloured for a Londoner, would be accepted by any life insurance office, at a moderate rate, considering his age. The farmer thought of his own health, and it was with a pang that he fancied himself being probed by the civil-speaking life insurance doctor (a gentleman who seems to issue upon us applicants from out the muffled folding doors of Hades; taps us on the chest, once, twice, and forthwith writes down our fateful dates). Probably, Anthony would not have to pay a higher rate of interest than he.

"Are you insured, brother Tony?" the question escaped him.

"No, I ain't, brother William John;" Anthony went on nodding like an automaton set in motion. "There's two sides to that. I'm a long-lived man. Long-lived men don't insure; that is, unless they're fools. That's how the offices thrive."

"Case of accident?" the farmer suggested.

"Oh! nothing happens to me," replied Anthony.

The farmer jumped on his legs, and yawned.

"Shall we take a turn in the garden, brother Tony?"

"With all my heart, brother William John."

The farmer had conscience to be ashamed of the fit of irritable vexation which had seized on him; and it was not till Anthony being asked the date of his birth, had declared himself twelve years his senior, that the farmer felt his speculations to be justified. Anthony was nearly a generation ahead. They walked about, and were seen from the windows touching one another on the shoulder in a brotherly way. When they came back to the women, and tea, the farmer's mind was cooler, and all his reckonings had gone to mist. He was dejected over his tea.

"What is the matter, father?" said Rhoda.

"I'll tell you, my dear," Anthony replied for him. "He's envying me some one I want to ask me that question when I'm at my tea in London."

CHAPTER IV.

THE TEXT FROM SCRIPTURE.

Mr. Fleming kept his forehead from his daughter's good-night kiss until the room was cleared, after supper, and then embracing her very heartily, he informed her that her uncle had offered to pay her expenses on a visit to London, by which he contrived to hint that a golden path had opened to his girl, and at the same time entreated her to think nothing of it; to dismiss all expectations and dreams of impossible sums from her mind, and simply to endeavour to please her uncle, who had a right to his own, and a right to do what he liked with his own, though it were forty, fifty times as much as he possessed—and what that might amount to no one knew. In fact, as is the way with many experienced persons, in his attempt to give advice

to another, he was very impressive in lecturing himself, and warned that other not to succumb to a temptation principally by indicating the natural basis of the allurement. Happily for young and for old, the intense insight of the young has much to distract or soften it. Rhoda thanked her father, and chose to think that she had listened to good and wise things.

"Your sister," he said—"but we won't speak of her. If I could part with you, my lass, I'd rather she was the one to come back."

"Dahlia would be killed by our quiet life now," said Rhoda.

"Ay," the farmer mused. "If she'd got to pay six men every Saturday night, she wouldn't complain o' the quiet. But, there!—you neither of you ever took to farming or to housekeeping; but any gentleman might be proud to have one of you for a wife. I said so when you was girls; And if you've been dull, my dear, what's the good o' society? Tea-cakes mayn't seem to cost money, nor a glass o' grog to neighbours; but once open the door to that sort o' thing and your reckoning goes. And what I said to your

poor mother's true. I said: our girls, they're mayhap not equals of the Hollands, the Nashaws, the Perrets, and the others about here—no; they're not equals, because the others are not equals o' *them*, maybe."

The yeoman's pride struggled out in this obscure way to vindicate his unneighbourliness and the seclusion of his daughters from the society of girls of their age and condition; nor was it hard for Rhoda to assure him, as she earnestly did, that he had acted rightly.

Rhoda, assisted by Mrs. Sumfit, was late in the night looking up what poor decorations she possessed wherewith to enter London, and be worthy of her sister's embrace, so that she might not shock the lady Dahlia had become.

"Depend you on it, my dear," said Mrs. Sumfit, "my Dahly's grown above him. That's nettles to your uncle, my dear. He can't abide it. Don't you see he can't? Some men's like that. Others 'd see you dressed like a princess, and not be satisfied. They vary so, the teasin' creatures! But one and all, whether they likes it or not, owns a woman's the better for bein' dressed in

the fashion. What do grieve me to my insidest heart, it is your bonnet. What a bonnet that was lying beside her dear round arm in the po'trait, and her finger up making a dimple in her cheek, as if she was thinking of us in a sorrowful way. That's the arts o' bein' lady-like:—look sad-like. How *could* we get a bonnet for you?"

"My own must do," said Rhoda.

"Yes, and you to look like lady and servant-gal a-going out for an airin'; and she to feel it! Pretty, that 'd be!"

"She wont be ashamed of me," Rhoda faltered; and then hummed a little tune, and said firmly—"It's no use my trying to look like what I'm not."

"No, truly;" Mrs. Sumfit assented. "But it's your bein' behind the fashions what hurt me. As well you might be an old thing like me, for any pleasant looks you'll git. Now, the country—you're like in a coal-hole for the matter o' that. While London, my dear, its pavement and gutter, and omnibus traffic; and if you're not in the fashion, the little wicked boys of the streets themselves 'll let you know

it; they've got such eyes for fashions, they have. And I don't want my Dahly's sister to be laughed at, and called 'coal-scuttle,' as happened to me, my dear, believe it or not—and shoved aside, and said to—'who are you?' For she reely is nice-looking. Your uncle Anthony and Mr. Robert agreed upon that."

Rhoda coloured, and said, after a time, "It would please me if people didn't speak about my looks."

The looking-glass probably told her no more than that she was nice to the eye, but a young man who sees anything should not see like a mirror, and a girl's instinct whispers to her, that her image has not been taken to heart when she is accurately and impartially described by him.

The key to Rhoda at this period was a desire to be made warm with praise of her person. She beheld her face at times, and shivered. The face was so strange with its dark, thick, eyebrows, and peculiarly straight-gazing brown eyes; the level, long, red under-lip and curved upper; and the chin and nose, so unlike

Dahlia's, whose nose was, after a little dip from the forehead, one soft line to its extremity, and whose chin seemed shaped to a cup. Rhoda's outlines were harder. There was a suspicion of a heavenward turn to her nose, and of squareness to her chin. Her face, when studied, inspired in its owner's mind a doubt of her being even nice to the eye, though she knew that in exercise, and when smitten by a blush, brightness and colour aided her claims. She knew also that her head was easily poised on her neck; and that her figure was reasonably good; but all this was unconfirmed knowledge, quickly shadowed by the doubt. As the sun is wanted to glorify the right features of a landscape, this girl thirsted for a dose of golden flattery. She felt, without envy of her sister, that Dahlia eclipsed her; and all she prayed for, was that she might not be quite so much in the background and obscure.

But great, powerful London—the new universe to her spirit—was opening its arms to her. In her half sleep that night she heard the mighty thunder of the city, crashing tumults

of disordered harmonies, and the splendour of the lamp-lighted city appeared to hang up under a dark-blue heaven, removed from earth, like a fresh planet to which she was being beckoned.

At breakfast on the Sunday morning, her departure was necessarily spoken of in public. Robert talked to her exactly as he had talked to Dahlia, on the like occasion. He mentioned, as she remembered in one or two instances, the names of the same streets, and professed a similar anxiety as regarded driving her to the station and catching the train. "That's a thing which makes a man feel his strength's nothing," he said. "You can't stop it. I fancy I could stop a four-in-hand at full gallop. Mind, I only fancy I could; but when you come to do with iron and steam I feel like a baby. You can't stop trains."

"You can trip 'em," said Anthony, a remark that called forth general laughter, and increased the impression that he was a man of resources.

Rhoda was vexed by Robert's devotion to his

strength. She was going, and wished to go, but she wished to be regretted as well; and she looked at him more. He, on the contrary, scarcely looked at her at all. He threw verbal turnips, oats, oxen, poultry, and every possible melancholy matter-of-fact thing, about the table, described the farm and his fondness for it and the neighbourhood; said a farmer's life was best, and gave Rhoda a week in which to be tired of London.

She sneered in her soul, thinking "how little he knows of the constancy in the nature of women!" adding, "*when* they form attachments."

Anthony was shown at church, in spite of a feeble intimation he expressed, that it would be agreeable to him to walk about in the March sunshine, and see the grounds and the wild flowers, which never gave trouble, nor cost a penny, and were always pretty, and worth twenty of your artificial contrivances.

"Same as I say to Miss Dahly," he took occasion to remark; "but no!—no good. I don't believe women *hear* ye, when you talk

sense of that kind. 'Look,' says I, 'at a violet.' 'Look,' says she, 'at a rose.' Well, what can ye say after that? She swears the rose looks best. You swear the violet costs least. Then there you have a battle between what it costs and how it looks."

Robert pronounced a conventional affirmative, when called on for it by a look from Anthony. Whereupon Rhoda cried out:

"Dahlia was right—she was right, uncle."

"She was right, my dear, if she was a ten-thousander. She wasn't right as a farmer's daughter with poor expectations;—I'd say humble, if humble she were. As a farmer's daughter, she should choose the violet side. That's clear as day. One thing's good, I admit; she tells me she makes her own bonnets, and they're as good as milliners', and that's a proud matter to say of your own niece. And to buy dresses for herself, I suppose, she's sat down and she made dresses for fine ladies. I've found her at it. 'Save the money for the work,' says I. What does she reply—she always has a reply; 'uncle, I know the value of money

better.' 'You mean, you spend it,' I says to her. 'I buy more than it's worth,' says she. And I'll tell you what, Mr. Robert Armstrong, as I find your name to be, sir; if you beat women at talking, my lord, you're a clever chap."

Robert laughed. "I give in at the first mile."

"Don't think much of women—is that it, sir?"

"I'm glad to say I don't think of them at all."

"Do you think of one woman, now, Mr. Robert Armstrong?"

"I'd much rather think of two."

"And why, may I ask?"

"It's safer."

"Now, I don't exactly see that," said Anthony.

"You set one to tear the other," Robert explained.

"You're a Grand Turk Mogul in your reasonings of women, Mr. Robert Armstrong. I hope as your morals are sound, sir?"

They were on the road to church, but Robert could not restrain a swinging outburst.

He observed that he hoped likewise that his morals were sound.

"Because," said Anthony, "do you see, sir, two wives——"

"No, no; one wife," interposed Robert. "You said 'think about;' I'd 'think about' any number of women, if I was idle. But the woman you mean to make your wife, you go to at once, and don't 'think about' her or the question either."

"You make sure of her, do you, sir?"

"No: I try my luck; that is all."

"Suppose she wont have ye?"

"Then I wait for her."

"Suppose she gets married to somebody else?"

"Well, you know, I shouldn't cast eye on a woman who was a fool."

"Well, upon my——" Anthony checked his exclamation, returning to the charge with, "Just suppose, for the sake of supposing—suppose she was a fool, and gone and got married, and you

thrown back'ard on one leg, starin' at the other, stupified—like?"

"I don't mind supposing it," said Robert. "Say, she's a fool. Her being a fool argues that I was one in making a fool's choice. So, she jilts me, and I get a pistol, or I get a neat bit of rope, or I take a clean header with a cannon-ball at my heels, or I go to the chemist's and ask for stuff to poison rats,—anything a fool 'd do under the circumstances, it don't matter what."

Old Anthony waited for Rhoda to jump over a style, and said to her—

"He laughs at the whole lot of ye."

"Who?" she asked, with betraying cheeks.

"This Mr. Robert Armstrong of yours."

"Of mine, uncle!"

"He don't seem to care a snap o' the finger for any of ye."

"Then, none of us must care for him, uncle."

"Now, just the contrary. That always shows a young fellow who's attending to his business. If he'd seen you boil potatoes, make dumplins, beds, tea, all that, you'd have had a chance.

He'd have marched up to ye before you was off to London."

"Saying, 'You are the woman.'" Rhoda was too desperately tickled by the idea to refrain from uttering it, though she was angry, and suffering internal discontent. "Or else, 'You are the cook,'" she muttered, and shut, with the word, steel bars across her heart, calling him, mentally, names not justified by anything he had said or done—such as mercenary, tyrannical, and such like.

Robert was attentive to her in church. Once she caught him with his eyes on her face; but he betrayed no confusion, and looked away at the clergyman. When the text was given out, he found the place in his Bible, and handed it to her pointedly—"There shall be snares and traps unto you;" a line from Joshua. She received the act as a polite parting civility; but when she was coming out of church, Robert saw that a blush swept over her face, and wondered what thoughts could be rising within her, unaware that girls catch certain meanings late, and suffer a fiery torture when these meanings are clear to

them. Rhoda called up the pride of her womanhood that she might despise the man who had dared to distrust her. She kept her poppy colour throughout the day, so sensitive was this pride. But most she was angered, after reflection, by the doubts which Robert appeared to cast on Dahlia, in setting his finger upon that burning line of Scripture. It opened a whole black kingdom to her imagination, and first touched her visionary life with shade. She was sincere in her ignorance that the doubts were her own, but they lay deep in unawakened recesses of the soul; it was by a natural action of her reason that she transferred and forced them upon him who had chanced to make them visible.

CHAPTER V.

THE SISTERS MEET.

When young minds are set upon a distant object, they scarcely live for anything about them. The drive to the station and the parting with Robert, the journey to London, which had latterly seemed to her secretly-distressed anticipation like a sunken city—a place of wonder with the waters over it—all passed by smoothly; and then it became necessary to call a cabman, for whom, as he did her the service to lift her box, Rhoda felt a gracious respect, until a quarrel ensued between him and her uncle concerning sixpence; a poor sum, as she thought; but representing, as Anthony impressed upon her understanding during the conflict of hard words, a principle. Those who can persuade themselves that they are fighting for a principle, fight strenuously, and

may be reckoned upon to overmatch combatants on behalf of a miserable small coin; so the cabman went away discomfited. He used such bad language that Rhoda had no pity for him, and hearing her uncle style it "the London tongue," she thought dispiritedly of Dahlia's having had to listen to it through so long a season. Dahlia was not at home; but Mrs. Wicklow, Anthony's landlady, undertook to make Rhoda comfortable, which operation she began by praising dark young ladies over fair ones, at the same time shaking Rhoda's arm that she might not fail to see a compliment was intended. "This is our London way," she said. But Rhoda was most disconcerted when she heard Mrs. Wicklow relate that her daughter and Dahlia were out together, and say, that she had no doubt they had found some pleasant and attentive gentleman for a companion, if they had not gone purposely to meet one. Her thoughts of her sister were perplexed, and London seemed a gigantic net around them both.

"Yes, that's the habit with the girls up

here," said Anthony; "that's what fine bonnets mean."

Rhoda dropped into a bitter depth of brooding. The savage nature of her virgin pride was such that it gave her great suffering even to suppose that a strange gentleman would dare to address her sister. She half-fashioned the words on her lips that she had dreamed of a false Zion, and was being righteously punished. By-and-by the landlady's daughter returned home alone, saying, with a dreadful laugh, that Dahlia had sent her for her Bible; but she would give no explanation of the singular mission which had been entrusted to her, and she showed no willingness to attempt to fulfil it, merely repeating, "Her Bible!" with a vulgar exhibition of simulated scorn that caused Rhoda to shrink from her, though she would gladly have poured out a multitude of questions in the ear of one who had last been with her beloved. After a while, Mrs. Wicklow looked at the clock, and instantly became overclouded with an extreme gravity.

"Eleven! and she sent Mary Ann home for her Bible. This looks bad. I call it hypo-

critical, the idea of mentioning the Bible. Now, if she had said to Mary Ann, go and fetch any other book but a Bible!"

"It was mother's Bible," interposed Rhoda.

Mrs. Wicklow replied: "And I wish all young women to be as innocent as you, my dear. You'll get you to bed. You're a dear, mild, sweet, good young woman. I'm never deceived in character."

Vaunting her penetration, she accompanied Rhoda to Dahlia's chamber, bidding her sleep speedily, or that when her sister came they would be talking till the cock crowed hoarse.

"There's a poultry-yard close to us?" said Rhoda; feeling less at home when she heard that there was not.

The night was quiet and clear. She leaned her head out of the window, and heard the mellow Sunday evening roar of the city as of a sea at ebb. And Dahlia was out on the sea. Rhoda thought of it as she looked at the row of lamps, and listened to the noise remote, until the sight of stars was pleasant as the faces of friends. "People are kind here," she reflected, for her

short experience of the landlady was good, and a young gentleman who had hailed a cab for her at the station, had a nice voice. He was fair. "I am dark," came a spontaneous reflection. She undressed, and half dozing over her beating heart in bed, heard the street door open, and leaped to think that her sister approached, jumping up in her bed to give ear to the door and the stairs, that were conducting her joy to her; but she quickly recomposed herself, and feigned sleep, for the delight of revelling in her sister's first wonderment. The door was flung wide, and Rhoda heard her name called by Dahlia's voice, and then there was a delicious silence, and she felt that Dahlia was coming up to her on tiptoe, and waited for her head to be stooped near, that she might fling out her arms, and draw the dear head to her bosom. But Dahlia came only to the bedside, without leaning over, and spoke of her looks, which held the girl quiet.

"How she sleeps! It's a country sleep!" Dahlia murmured. "She's changed, but it's all for the better. She's quite a woman; she's a

perfect brunette; and the nose I used to laugh at suits her face and those black, thick eyebrows of hers; my pet! Oh, why is she here? What's meant by it? I knew nothing of her coming. Is she sent on purpose?"

Rhoda did not stir. The tone of Dahlia's speaking, low and almost awful to her, laid a flat hand on her, and kept her still.

"I came for my Bible," she heard Dahlia say. "I promised mother—oh, my poor darling mother! And Dody lying in my bed! Who would have thought of such things? Perhaps Heaven does look after us and interfere. What will become of me? Oh, you pretty innocent in your sleep! I lie for hours, and can't sleep. She binds her hair in a knot on the pillow, just as she used to in the old farm days!"

Rhoda knew that her sister was bending over her now, but she was almost frigid, and could not move.

Dahlia went to the looking-glass. "How flushed I am!" she murmured. "No; I'm pale, quite white. I've lost my strength. What can I do? How could I take mother's Bible,

and run from my pretty one, who expects me, and dreams she'll wake with me beside her in the morning. I can't—I can't! If you love me, Edward, you wont wish it."

She fell into a chair, crying wildly, and muffling her sobs. Rhoda's eyelids grew moist, but wonder and the cold anguish of senseless sympathy held her still frost-bound. All at once she heard the window open. Some one spoke in the street below; some one uttered Dahlia's name. A deep bell swung a note of midnight.

"Go!" cried Dahlia.

The window was instantly shut.

The vibration of Dahlia's voice went through Rhoda like the heavy shaking of the bell after it had struck, and the room seemed to spin and hum. It was to her but another minute before her sister slid softly into the bed, and they were locked together.

CHAPTER VI.

EDWARD AND ALGERNON.

Boyne's Bank was of the order of those old and firmly-fixed establishments which have taken root with the fortunes of the country—are honourable as England's name, solid as her prosperity, and even as the flourishing green tree to shareholders: a granite house. Boyne himself had been disembodied for more than a century: Burt and Hamble were still of the flesh; but a greater than Burt or Hamble was Blancove—the Sir William Blancove, Baronet, of city feasts and charities, who, besides being a wealthy merchant, possessed of a very acute head for banking, was a scholarly gentleman, worthy of riches. His brother was Squire Blancove, of Wrexby; but between these two close relatives there existed no stronger feeling than what was

expressed by open contempt of a mind dedicated to business on the one side, and quiet contempt of a life devoted to indolence on the other. Nevertheless, Squire Blancove, though everybody knew how deeply he despised his junior for his city-gained title and commercial occupation, sent him his son Algernon, to get the youth into sound discipline, if possible. This was after the elastic Algernon had, on the paternal intimation of his colonel, relinquished his cornetcy and military service. Sir William received the hopeful young fellow much in the spirit with which he listened to the tales of his brother's comments on his own line of conduct; that is to say, as homage to his intellectual superiority. Mr. Algernon was installed in the bank, and sat down for a long career of groaning at the desk with more complacency than was expected from him. Sir William forwarded excellent accounts to his brother of the behaviour of the heir to his estates. It was his way of rebuking the squire, and in return for it the squire, though somewhat comforted, despised his clerkly son, and lived to learn how very unjustly he did so. Adoles-

cents, who have the taste for running into excesses, enjoy the breath of change as another form of excitement; change is a sort of debauch to them. They will delight infinitely in a simple country round of existence—in propriety, and church-going—in the sensation of feeling innocent. There is little that does not enrapture them, if you tie them down to nothing, and let them try all. Sir William was deceived by his nephew. He would have taken him into his town-house; but his own son, Edward, who was studying for the law, had chambers in the Temple, and Algernon, receiving an invitation from Edward, declared a gentle preference for the abode of his cousin. His allowance from his father was properly contracted (to keep him from excesses, as the genius of his senior devised), and Sir William saw no objection to the scheme, and made none. The two dined with him about twice in the month.

Edward Blancove was three-and-twenty years old, a student by fits, and a young man given to be moody. He had powers of gaiety far eclipsing Algernon's, but he was not the same

easy, tripping sinner, and flippant soul. He was in that yeasty condition of his years when action and reflection alternately usurp the mind; remorse succeeded dissipation, and indulgences offered the soporific to remorse. The friends of the two imagined that Algernon was, or would become, his evil genius. In reality, Edward was the perilous companion. He was composed of better stuff. Algernon was but an airy animal nature, the soul within him being an effervescence lightly let loose. Edward had a fatally serious spirit, and one of some strength. What he gave himself up to, he could believe to be correct, in the teeth of an opposing world, until he tired of it, when he sided as heartily with the world against his quondam self. Algernon might mislead, or point his cousin's passions for a time; yet if they continued their courses together, there was danger that Algernon would degenerate into a reckless subordinate—a minister, a valet, and be tempted unknowingly to do things in earnest, which is nothing less than perdition to this sort of creature.

But the key to young men is the ambition, or, in the place of it, the romantic sentiment nourished by them. Edward aspired to become Attorney-General of these realms, not a judge, you observe; for a judge is to the imagination of youthful minds a stationary being, venerable, but not active; whereas, your Attorney-General is always in the fray, and fights commonly on the winning side, a point that renders his position attractive to sagacious youth. Algernon had other views. Civilization had tried him, and found him wanting; so he condemned it. Moreover, sitting now all day at a desk, he was civilization's drudge. No wonder, then, that his dream was of prairies, and primeval forests, and Australian wilds. He believed in his heart that he would be a man new made over there, and always looked forward to savage life as to a bath that would cleanse him, so that it did not much matter his being unclean for the present.

The young men had a fair cousin by marriage, a Mrs. Margaret Lovell, a widow. At seventeen she had gone with her husband to India, where Harry Lovell encountered the sword of a

Sikh Sirdar, and tried the last of his much-vaunted swordsmanship, which, with his skill at the pistols, had served him better in two antecedent duels, for the vindication of his lovely and terrible young wife. He perished on the field, critically admiring the stroke to which he owed his death. A week after Harry's burial his widow was asked in marriage by his colonel. Captains, and a giddy subaltern likewise, disputed claims to possess her. She, however, decided to arrest further bloodshed, by quitting the regiment. She always said that she left India to save her complexion; "and people don't know how very candid I am," she added, for the colonel above-mentioned was wealthy—a man expectant of a title, and a good match, and she was laughed at when she thus assigned trivial reasons for momentous resolutions. It is a luxury to be candid; and perfect candour can do more for us than a dark disguise.

Mrs. Lovell's complexion was worth saving from the ravages of an Indian climate, and the persecution of claimants to her hand. She was golden and white, like an autumnal birch-tree—

yellow hair, with warm-toned streaks in it, shading a fabulously fair skin. Then, too, she was tall, of a nervous build, supple and proud in motion, a brilliant horsewoman, and a most distinguished sitter in an easy drawing-room chair, which is, let me impress upon you, no mean quality. After riding out for hours with a sweet comrade, who has thrown the mantle of dignity half way off her shoulders, it is perplexing, and mixed strangely of humiliation and ecstacy, to come upon her clouded majesty where she reclines as upon rose-hued clouds, in a mystic circle of restriction (she who laughed at your jokes, and capped them, two hours ago); a queen.

Between Margaret Lovell and Edward there was a misunderstanding, of which no one knew the nature, for they spoke in public very respectfully one of the other. It had been supposed that they were lovers once; but when lovers quarrel, they snarl, they bite, they worry; their eyes are indeed unveiled, and their mouths unmuzzled. Now Margaret said of Edward: "He is sure to rise; he has such good prin-

ciples." Edward of Margaret: "She only wants a husband who will keep her well in hand." These sentences scarcely carried actual compliments when you knew the speakers; but outraged lovers cannot talk in that style after they have broken apart. It is possible that Margaret and Edward conveyed to one another as sharp a sting as envenomed lovers attempt. Gossip had once betrothed them, but was now at fault. The lady had a small jointure, and lived partly with her uncle, Lord Elling, partly with Squire Blancove, her aunt's husband, and a little by herself, which was when she counted money in her purse, and chose to assert her independence. She had a name in the world. There is a fate attached to some women, from Helen of Troy downwards, that blood is to be shed for them. One duel on behalf of a woman is a reputation to her for life; two are notoriety. If she is very young, can they be attributable to her? We charge them naturally to her overpowering beauty. It happened that Mrs. Lovell was beautiful. Under the light of the two duels her beauty shone as from an illumination of

black flame. Boys adored Mrs. Lovell. These are moths. But more, the birds of air, nay, grave owls (who stand in this metaphor for whiskered experience) thronged, dashing at the apparition of terrible splendour. Was it her fault that she had a name in the world?

Mrs. Margaret Lovell's portrait hung in Edward's room. It was a photograph exquisitely coloured, and was on the left of a dark Judith, dark with a serenity of sternness. On the right hung another coloured photograph of a young lady, also fair; and it was a point of taste to choose between them. Do you like the hollowed lily's cheeks, or the plump rose's? Do you like a thinnish fall of golden hair, or an abundant cluster of nut-brown? Do you like your blonde with limpid blue eyes, or prefer an endowment of sunny hazel? Finally, are you taken by an air of artistic innocence winding serpentine about your heart's fibres; or is blushing simplicity sweeter to you? Mrs. Lovell's eyebrows were the faintly-marked trace of a perfect arch. The other young person's were thickish, more level; a full brown colour. She looked

as if she had not yet attained to any sense of her being a professed beauty: but the fair widow was clearly bent upon winning you, and had a shy, playful intentness of aspect. Her pure white skin was flat on the bone; the lips came forward in a soft curve, and, if they were not artistically stained, were triumphantly fresh. Here, in any case, she beat her rival, whose mouth had the plebeian beauty's fault of being too straight in a line, and was not trained, apparently, to tricks of dainty pouting.

It was morning, and the cousins having sponged in pleasant cold water, arranged themselves for exercise, and came out simultaneously into the sitting-room, slippered, and in flannels. They nodded and went through certain curt greetings, and then Algernon stepped to a cupboard and tossed out the leather gloves. The room was large and they had a tolerable space for the work, when the breakfast-table had been drawn a little on one side. You saw at a glance which was the likelier man of the two, when they stood opposed. Algernon's

rounded features, full lips and falling chin, were not a match, though he was quick on his feet, for the wary, prompt eyes, set mouth, and hardness of Edward. Both had stout muscle, but in Edward there was vigour of brain as well, which seemed to knit and inform his shape: without which, in fact, a man is as a ship under no command. Both looked their best; as, when sparring, men always do look.

"Now, then," said Algernon, squaring up to his cousin in good style, "now's the time for that unwholesome old boy underneath to commence groaning."

"Step as light as you can," replied Edward, meeting him with the pretty motion of the gloves.

"I'll step as light as a French dancing-master. Let's go to Paris and learn the *savate*, Ned. It must be a new sensation to stand on one leg and knock a fellow's hat off with the other."

"Stick to your fists."

"Hang it! I wish your fists wouldn't stick to *me* so."

"You talk too much."

"'Gad, I don't get puffy half so soon as you."

"I want country air."

"You said you were going out, old Ned."

"I changed my mind."

Saying which, Edward shut his teeth, and talked for two or three hot minutes wholly with his fists. The room shook under Algernon's boundings to right and left, till a blow sent him back on the breakfast-table, shattered a cup on the floor, and bespattered his close flannel shirt with a funereal coffee-tinge.

"What the deuce I said to bring that on myself, I don't know," Algernon remarked as he rose. "Anything connected with the country disagreeable to you, Ned? Come! a bout of quiet scientific boxing and none of these beastly rushes, as if you were singling me out of a crowd of magsmen. Did you go to church yesterday, Ned? Confound it, you're on me again, are you!"

And Algernon went on spouting unintelligible talk under a torrent of blows. He lost his temper and fought out at them; but as it speedily became evident to him that the loss

laid him open to punishment, he prudently recovered it, sparred, danced about, and contrived to shake the room in a manner that caused Edward to drop his arms, in consideration for the distracted occupant of the chambers below. Algernon accepted the truce, and made it peace by casting off one glove.

"There! that's a pleasant morning breather," he said, and sauntered to the window to look at the river. "I always feel the want of it when I don't get it. I could take a thrashing rather than not on with the gloves to begin the day. Look at those boats! Fancy my having to go down to the city. It makes me feel like my blood circulating the wrong way. My father'll suffer some day, for keeping me at this low ebb of cash, by jingo!"

He uttered this with a prophetic fierceness.

"I cannot even scrape together enough for entrance money to a club. It's sickening! I wonder whether I shall ever get used to banking work? There's an old clerk in our office who says he should feel ill if he missed a day. And the old porter beats him—bangs him to fits. I believe

he'd die off if he didn't see the house open to the minute. They say that old boy's got a pretty niece; but he don't bring her to the office now. Reward of merit!—Mr. Anthony Hackbut is going to receive ten pounds a year extra. That's for his honesty. I wonder whether I could earn a reputation for the sake of a prospect of ten extra pounds to my salary. *I've* got a salary! hurrah! But if they keep me to my hundred and fifty per annum, don't let them trust me every day with the bags, as they do that old fellow. Some of the men say he's good to lend fifty pounds at a pinch.—Are the chops coming, Ned?"

"The chops are coming," said Edward, who had thrown on a boating-coat and plunged into a book, and spoke echoing.

"Here's little Peggy Lovell." Algernon faced this portrait. "It don't do her justice. She's got more life, more change in her, more fire. She's starting for town, I hear."

"She is starting for town," said Edward.

"How do you know that?" Algernon swung about to ask.

Edward looked round to him. "By the fact of your not having fished for a holiday this week. How did you leave her yesterday, Algy? Quite well, I hope."

The ingenuous face of the young gentleman crimsoned.

"Oh, she was well," he said. "Ha! I see there can be some attraction in your dark women."

"You mean that Judith? Yes, she's a good diversion." Edward gave a two-edged response. "What train did you come up by last night?"

"The last from Wrexby. That reminds me: I saw a young Judith just as I got out. She wanted a cab. I called it for her. She belongs to old Hackbut of the Bank—the old porter, you know. If it wasn't that there's always something about dark women which makes me think they're going to have a moustache, I should take to that girl's face."

Edward launched forth an invective against fair women.

"What have they done to you—what have they done?" said Algernon.

"My good fellow, they're nothing but colour.

They've no conscience. If they swear a thing to you one moment, they break it the next. They can't help doing it. You don't ask a gilt weathercock to keep faith with anything but the wind, do you? It's an ass that trusts a fair woman at all, or has anything to do with the confounded set. Cleopatra was fair; so was Delilah; so is the Devil's wife. Reach me that book of Reports."

"By jingo!" cried Algernon, "my stomach reports that if provision doesn't soon approach ——Why don't you keep a French cook here, Ned? Let's give up the women, and take to a French cook."

Edward yawned horribly. "All in good time. It's what we come to. It's philosophy—your French cook! I wish I had it, or him. I'm afraid a fellow can't anticipate his years—not so lucky!"

"By Jove! we shall have to be philosophers before we breakfast!" Algernon exclaimed. "It's nine. I've to be tied to the stake at ten, chained and muzzled—a leetle—a dawg! I wish I hadn't had to leave the service. It was a vile conspiracy

against me there, Ned. Hang all tradesmen! I sit on a stool, and add up figures. I work harder than a nigger in the office. That's my life: but I must feed. It's no use going to the office in a rage."

"Will you try on the gloves again?" was Edward's mild suggestion.

Algernon thanked him, and replied that he knew him. Edward hit hard when he was empty.

They now affected patience, as far as silence went to make up an element of that sublime quality. The chops arriving, they disdained the mask. Algernon fired his glove just over the waiter's head, and Edward put the case to his conscience; after which they sat and ate, talking little. The difference between them was, that Edward knew the state of Algernon's mind, and what was working within it, while the latter stared at a blank wall as regarded Edward's.

"Going out after breakfast, Ned?" said Algernon, quietly. "We'll walk to the city together, if you like."

Edward fixed one of his intent looks upon

his cousin. "You're not going to the city to-day?"

"The deuce, I'm not!"

"You're going to dance attendance on Mrs. Lovell, whom it's your pleasure to call Peggy, when you're some leagues out of her hearing."

Algernon failed to command his countenance. He glanced at one of the portraits, and said, "Who *is* that girl up there? Tell us her name. Talking of Mrs. Lovell, has she ever seen it?"

"If you'll put on your coat, my dear Algy, I *will* talk to you about Mrs. Lovell." Edward kept his penetrative eyes on Algernon. "Listen to me: you'll get into a mess there."

"If I must listen, Ned, I'll listen in my shirt-sleeves, with all respect to the lady."

"Very well. The shirt sleeves help the air of bravado. Now, you know that I've what they call 'knelt at her feet.' She's handsome. Don't cry out. She's dashing, and as near being a devil as any woman I ever met. Do you know why we broke? I'll tell you. Plainly, because I refused to believe that one of her men had in-

sulted her. You understand what that means. I declined to be a chief party in a scandal."

"Declined to fight the fellow?" interposed Algernon. "More shame to you!"

"I think you're a year younger than I am, Algy. You have the privilege of speaking with that year's simplicity. Mrs. Lovell will play you as she played me. I acknowledge her power, and I keep out of her way. I don't bet; I don't care to waltz; I can't keep horses; so I don't lose much by the privation to which I subject myself."

"I bet, I waltz, and I ride. So," said Algernon, "I should lose tremendously."

"You will lose, mark my words."

"Is the lecture of my year's senior concluded?" said Algernon.

"Yes; I've done," Edward answered.

"Then I'll put on my coat, Ned, and I'll smoke in it. That'll give you assurance I'm not going near Mrs. Lovell, if anything will."

"That gives me assurance that Mrs. Lovell tolerates in you what she detests," said Edward, relentless in his insight; "and, consequently,

gives me assurance that she finds you of particular service to her at present."

Algernon had a lighted match in his hand. He flung it into the fire. "I'm hanged if I don't think you have the confounded vanity to suppose she sets me as a spy upon you!"

A smile ran along Edward's lips. "I don't think you'd know it, if she did."

"Oh, you're ten years older; you're twenty," bawled Algernon, in an extremity of disgust. "Don't I know what game you're following up? Isn't it clear as day you've got another woman in your eye?"

"It's as clear as day, my good Algy, that you see a portrait hanging in my chambers, and you have heard Mrs. Lovell's opinion of the fact. So much is perfectly clear. There's my hand. I don't blame you. She's a clever woman, and like many of the sort, shrewd at guessing the worst. Come, take my hand. I tell you, I don't blame you. I've been little dog to her myself, and fetched and carried, and wagged my tail. It's charming while it lasts. Will you shake it?"

"Your *tail*, man?" Algernon roared in pretended amazement.

Edward eased him back to friendliness by laughing. "No; my hand."

They shook hands.

"All right," said Algernon. "You mean well. It's very well for you to preach virtue to a poor devil; you've got loose, or you're regularly in love."

"Virtue! by Heaven!" Edward cried; "I wish I were entitled to preach it to any man on earth."

His face flushed. "There, good-bye, old fellow," he added. "Go to the City. I'll dine with you to-night, if you like; come and dine with me at my club. I shall be disengaged."

Algernon mumbled a flexible assent to an appointment at Edward's club, dressed himself with care, borrowed a sovereign, for which he nodded his acceptance, and left him.

Edward set his brain upon a book of law.

It may have been two hours after he had

sat thus in his Cistercian stillness, when a letter was delivered to him by one of the Inn porters. Edward read the superscription, and asked the porter who it was that brought it. Two young ladies, the porter said.

These were the contents:—

"I am not sure that you will ever forgive me. I cannot forgive myself when I think of that one word I was obliged to speak to you in the cold street, and nothing to explain why, and how much I love you. Oh! how I love you! I cry while I write. I cannot help it. I was a sop of tears all night long, and oh! if you had seen my face in the morning. I am thankful you did not. Mother's Bible brought me home. It must have been guidance, for in my bed there lay my sister, and I could not leave her, I *love her so*. I could not have got down stairs again after seeing her there; and I had to say that *cold* word and shut the window on you. May I call you Edward still? Oh, dear Edward, do make allowance for me. Write kindly to me. Say you forgive me. I feel

like a ghost to-day. My life seems quite behind me somewhere, and I hardly feel anything I touch. I declare to you, dearest one, I had no idea my sister was here. I was surprised when I heard her name mentioned by my landlady, and looked on the bed; suddenly my strength was gone, and it changed all that I was thinking. I never knew before that women were so weak, but now I see they are, and I only know I am at my Edward's mercy, and am stupid! Oh, so wretched and stupid. I shall not touch food till I *hear from you.* Oh, if you are angry, write so; but *do* write. My suspense would make you pity me. I know I deserve your anger. It was not that I do not trust you, Edward. My mother in heaven sees my heart and that I trust, I trust my heart, and everything I am and have to you. I would almost wish and wait to see you to-day in the Gardens, but my crying has made me such a streaked thing to look at. If I had rubbed my face with a scrubbing-brush, I could not look worse, and I cannot risk your seeing me. It would excuse you for hating me. Do you? Does he hate

her? She loves you. She would die for you, dear Edward. Oh! I feel that if I was told to-day that I should die for you to-morrow, it would be happiness. I am dying—yes, I am dying till I hear from you.

"Believe me,

"Your tender, loving, broken-hearted,

"DAHLIA."

There was a postscript:—

"May I still go to lessons?"

Edward finished the letter with a calmly perusing eye. He had winced triflingly at one or two expressions contained in it; forcible, perhaps, but not such as Mrs. Lovell smiling from the wall yonder would have used.

"The poor child threatens to eat no dinner, if I don't write to her," he said; and replied in a kind and magnanimous spirit, concluding—"Go to lessons, by all means."

Having accomplished this, he stood up, and by hazard fell to comparing the rival portraits; a melancholy and a comic thing to do, as you will find if you put two painted heads side by

side, and set their merits contesting, and reflect on the contest, and to what advantages, personal, or of the artist's, the winner owes the victory. Dahlia had been admirably dealt with by the artist; the charm of pure ingenuousness without rusticity was visible in her face and figure. Hanging there on the wall, she was a match for Mrs. Lovell.

CHAPTER VII.

GREAT NEWS FROM DAHLIA.

Rhoda returned home the heavier for a secret that she bore with her. All through the first night of her sleeping in London, Dahlia's sobs, and tender hugs, and self-reproaches, had penetrated her dreams, and when the morning came she had scarcely to learn that Dahlia loved some one. The confession was made; but his name was reserved. Dahlia spoke of him with such sacredness of respect she seemed lost in him, and like a creature kissing his feet. With tears rolling down her cheeks, and with moans of anguish, she spoke of the deliciousness of loving; of knowing one to whom she abandoned her will and her destiny, until, seeing how beautiful a bloom love threw upon the tearful worn face of her sister, Rhoda was impressed by a mystical

veneration for this man, and readily believed him to be above all other men, if not superhuman; for she was of an age and an imagination to conceive a spiritual pre-eminence over the weakness of mortality. She thought that one who could so transform her sister, touch her with awe, and give her gracefulness and humility, must be what Dahlia said he was. She asked shyly for his Christian name; but even so little Dahlia withheld. It was his wish that Dahlia should keep silence concerning him.

"Have you sworn an oath?" said Rhoda, wonderingly.

"No, dear love," Dahlia replied; "he only mentioned what he desired."

Rhoda was ashamed of herself for thinking it strange, and she surrendered her judgment to be stamped by the one who knew him well.

As regarded her uncle, Dahlia admitted that she had behaved forgetfully and unkindly, and promised amendment. She talked of the Farm as of an old ruin, with nothing but a thin shade of memory threading its walls, and appeared to marvel vaguely that it stood yet. "Father

shall not always want money," she said. She was particular in prescribing books for Rhoda to read; *good* authors, she emphasized, and named books of history, and poets, and quoted their verses. "For my darling will some day have a dear husband, and he must not look down on her." Rhoda shook her head, full sure that she could never be brought to utter such musical words naturally. "Yes, dearest, when you know what love is," said Dahlia, in an underbreath.

Could Robert inspire her with the power? Rhoda looked upon that poor, homely young man, half-curiously when she returned, and quite dismissed the notion. Besides, she had no feeling for herself. Her passion was fixed upon her sister, whose record of emotions in the letters from London placed her beyond dull days and nights. The letters struck many chords. A less subservient reader would have set them down as variations of the language of infatuation; but Rhoda was responsive to every word and change of mood, from the, "I am unworthy, degraded wretched," to "I am blest above the angels." If one letter said, "We met yester-

day," Rhoda's heart beat on to the question, "Shall I see him again to morrow?" And will she see him?—has she seen him?—agitated her and absorbed her thoughts.

So humbly did she follow her sister, without daring to forecast a prospect for her, or dreaming of an issue, that when on a summer morning a letter was brought in to her at the breakfast-table, marked "urgent and private," she opened it, and the first line dazzled her eyes—the surprise was a shock to her brain. She rose from her unfinished meal, and walked out into the wide air, feeling as if she walked on thunder.

The letter ran thus:—

"My own Innocent!

"I am married. We leave England to-day. I must not love you too much, for I have all my love to give to my Edward, my own now, and I am his trustingly for ever. But he will let me give you some of it—and Rhoda is never jealous. She shall have a great deal. Only I am frightened when I think how *immense* my

love is for him, so that anything—everything he thinks right is right to me. I am not afraid to think so. If I were to try, a cloud would come over me—it does, if only I fancy for half a moment I am rash, and a straw. I cannot exist except through him. So I must belong to him, and his will is my law. My prayer at my bedside every night is that I may die for him. We used to think the idea of death so terrible! Do you remember how we used to shudder together at night when we thought of people lying in the grave? And now, when I think that perhaps I may some day die for him, I feel like a crying in my heart with joy.

"I have left a letter—sent it, I mean—enclosed to uncle for father. He will see Edward by-and-by. Oh! may Heaven spare him from any grief. Rhoda will comfort him. Tell him how devoted I am. I am like drowned to everybody but one.

"We are looking on the sea. In half an hour I shall have forgotten the tread of English earth. I do not know that I breathe. All I know is a fear that I am flying, and my

strength will not continue. That is when I am not touching his hand. There is France opposite. I shut my eyes and see the whole country, but it is like what I feel for Edward—all in dark moonlight. Oh! I trust him so! I bleed for him. I could *make* all my veins bleed out at a sad thought about him. And from France to Switzerland and Italy. The sea sparkles just as if it said 'Come to the sun;' and I am going. Edward calls. Shall I be punished for so much happiness? I am too happy; I am too happy.

"God bless my beloved at home! That is my chief prayer now. I shall think of her when I am in the cathedrals.

"Oh, my Father in Heaven! bless them all! bless Rhoda! forgive me!

"I can hear the steam of the steamer at the pier. Here is Edward. He says I *may* send his *love* to you.

"Address:—

"Mrs. Edward Ayrton,

"Poste Restante,

"Lausanne,

"Switzerland.

"P.S.—Lausanne is where—but another time, and I will always tell you the history of the places to instruct you, poor heart in dull England. Adieu! Good-bye and God bless my innocent at home, my dear sister. I love her. I never can forget her. The day is so lovely. It seems on purpose for us. Be sure you write on thin paper to Lausanne. It is on a blue lake; you see snow mountains, and now there is a bell ringing—kisses from me! we start. I must sign.

"DAHLIA."

By the reading of this letter, Rhoda was caught vividly to the shore, and saw her sister borne away in the boat to the strange countries; she travelled with her, following her with gliding speed through a multiplicity of shifting scenes, opal landscapes, full of fire and dreams, and in all of them a great bell towered. "Oh, my sweet! my own beauty!" she cried in Dahlia's language. Meeting Mrs. Sumfit, she called her "Mother Dumpling," as Dahlia did of old, affectionately, and kissed her, and ran on to

Master Gammon, who was tramping leisurely on to the oatfield lying on towards the mill-holms.

"My sister sends you her love," she said brightly to the old man. Master Gammon responded with no remarkable flash of his eyes, and merely opened his mouth and shut it, as when a duck divides its bill, but fails to emit the customary quack.

"And to you, little pigs; and to you Mulberry; and you, Dapple; and you, and you, and you."

Rhoda nodded round to all the citizens of the farmyard; and so eased her heart of its laughing bubbles. After which, she fell to a meditative walk of demurer joy, and had a regret. It was simply that Dahlia's hurry in signing the letter, had robbed her of the delight of seeing "DAHLIA AYRTON" written proudly out, with its wonderful signification of the change in her life.

That was a trifling matter; yet Rhoda felt the letter was not complete in the absence of the bridal name. She fancied Dahlia to have

meant, perhaps, that she was Dahlia to her as of old, and not a stranger. "Dahlia ever; Dahlia nothing else for you," she heard her sister say. But how delicious and mournful, how terrible and sweet with meaning would "Dahlia Ayrton," the new name in the dear handwriting, have looked! "And I have a brother-in-law," she thought, and her cheeks tingled. The banks of fern and foxglove, and the green young oaks fringing the copse, grew rich in colour, as she reflected that this beloved unknown husband of her sister embraced her and her father as well; even the old bent beggarman on the sandy ridge, though he had a starved frame and carried pitiless faggots, stood illumined in a soft warmth. Rhoda could not go back to the house.

It chanced that the farmer that morning had been smitten with the virtue of his wife's opinion of Robert, and her parting recommendation concerning him.

"Have you a mind to either one of my two girls?" he put the question bluntly, finding himself alone with Robert.

Robert took a quick breath, and replied, "I have."

"Then make your choice," said the farmer, and tried to go about his business, but hung near Robert in the fields till he had asked: "Which one is it, my boy?"

Robert turned a blade of wheat in his mouth.

"I think I shall leave her to tell that," was his answer.

"Why, don't ye know which one you prefer to choose, man?" quoth Mr. Fleming.

"I mayn't know whether she prefers to choose me," said Robert.

The farmer smiled.

"You never can exactly reckon about them; that's true."

He was led to think: "Dahlia's the lass;" seeing that Robert had not had many opportunities of speaking with her.

"When my girls are wives, they'll do their work in the house," he pursued. "They may have a little bit o' property in land, ye know, and they may have a share in—in gold. That's not to be reckoned on. We're an old family,

Robert, and I suppose we've our pride somewhere down. Anyhow, you can't look on my girls and not own they're superior girls. I've no notion of forcing them to clean, and dish up, and do dairying, if it's not to their turn. They're handy with th' needle. They dress conformably, and do the millinery themselves. And I know they say their prayers of a night. That I know, if that's a comfort to ye, and it should be, Robert. For pray, and you can't go far wrong; and it's particularly good for girls. I'll say no more."

At the dinner-table, Rhoda was not present. Mr. Fleming fidgeted, blamed her and excused her, but as Robert appeared indifferent about her absence, he was confirmed in his idea that Dahlia attracted his fancy.

They had finished dinner, and Master Gammon had risen, when a voice immediately recognised as the voice of Anthony Hackbut was heard in the front part of the house. Mr. Fleming went round to him with a dismayed face.

"Lord!" said Mrs. Sumfit, "how I tremble!"

Robert, too, looked grave, and got away from the house. The dread of evil news of Dahlia was common to them all; yet none had mentioned it, Robert conceiving that it would be impertinence on his part to do so, the farmer, that the policy of permitting Dahlia's continued residence in London concealed the peril; while Mrs. Sumfit flatly defied the threatening of a mischance to one so sweet and fair, and her favourite. It is the insincerity of persons of their class; but I need not lay any stress on the wilfulness of uneducated minds. Robert walked across the fields, walking like a man with an object in view. As he dropped into one of the close lanes which led up to Wrexby Hall, he saw Rhoda standing under an oak, her white morning-dress covered with sun-spots. His impulse was to turn back, the problem, how to speak to her, not being settled within him. But the next moment his blood chilled; for he had perceived, though he had not felt simultaneously, that two gentlemen were standing near her, addressing her. And it was likewise manifest

that she listened to them. These presently raised their hats and disappeared. Rhoda came on towards Robert.

"You have forgotten your dinner," he said, with a queer sense of shame at dragging in the mention of that meal.

"I have been too happy to eat," Rhoda replied.

Robert glanced up the lane, but she gave no heed to this indication, and asked: "Has uncle come?"

"Did you expect him?"

"I thought he would come."

"What has made you happy?"

"You will hear from uncle."

"Shall I go and hear what those——"

Robert checked himself, but it would have been better had he spoken out. Rhoda's face from a light of interrogation lowered its look to contempt.

She did not affect the feminine simplicity which can so prettily misunderstand and put by an implied accusation of that nature. Doubtless her sharp instinct served her by

telling her that her contempt would hurt him shrewdly now. The foolishness of a man having much to say to a woman and not knowing how, or where the beginning of it might be, was perceptible about him. A shout from her father at the open garden-gate, hurried Rhoda on to meet him. Old Anthony was at Mr. Fleming's elbow.

"You know it? You have her letter, father?" said Rhoda, gaily, beneath the shadow of his forehead.

"And a Queen of the Egyptians is what you might have been," said Anthony, with a speculating eye upon Rhoda's dark bright face.

Rhoda put out her hand to him, but kept her gaze towards her father.

William Fleming relaxed the knot of his brows and lifted the letter.

"Listen, all! This is from a daughter to her father."

And he read, oddly accentuating the first syllables of the sentences:—

"DEAR FATHER,

"My husband will bring me to see you when I return to dear England. I ought to have concealed nothing, I know. Try to forgive me. I hope you will. I shall always think of you. God bless you!

"I am,

"Ever with respect,

"Your dearly loving Daughter,

"DAHLIA."

"Dahlia Blank!" said the farmer, turning his look from face to face.

A deep fire of emotion was evidently agitating him, for the letter rustled in his hand, and his voice was uneven. Of this, no sign was given by his inexpressive features. The round brown eyes and the ruddy varnish on his cheeks were a mask upon grief, if not also upon joy.

"Dahlia—what? What's her name?" he resumed. "Here—'my husband will bring me to see you'—who's her husband? Has he got a name? And a blank envelope to her uncle here, who's kept her in comfort for so long! And

this is all she writes to me! Will anyone spell out the meaning of it?"

"Dahlia was in great haste, father," said Rhoda.

"Oh, ay, you!—you're the one, I know," returned the farmer. "It's sister and sister, with you."

"But she was very, very hurried, father. I have a letter from her, and I have only 'Dahlia' written at the end—no other name."

"And you suspect no harm of your sister?"

"Father, how can I imagine any kind of harm?"

"That letter, my girl, sticks to my skull as though it meant to say, 'You've not understood me yet.' I've read it a matter of twenty times, and I'm no nearer to the truth of it. But, if she's lying, here in this letter, what's she walking on? How long are we to wait for to hear? I give you my word, Robert, I'm feeling for you as I am for myself. Or, wasn't it that one? Is it *this* one?" He levelled his finger at Rhoda. "In any case, Robert, you'll feel for me as a father. I'm shut in a dark room with

the candle blown out. I've heard of a sort of fear you have in that dilemmer, lest you should lay your fingers on edges of sharp knives, and if I think a step—if I go thinking a step, and feel my way, I do cut myself, and I bleed, I do. Robert, just take and say, it wasn't that one."

Such a statement would carry with it the confession that it was this one for whom he cared—this scornful one, this jilt, this brazen girl who could make appointments with gentlemen, or suffer them to speak to her, and subsequently look at him with innocence and with anger.

"Believe me, Mr. Fleming, I feel for you as much as a man can," he said, uneasily, swaying half round as he spoke.

"Do you suspect anything bad?" The farmer repeated the question, like one who only wanted a confirmation of his own suspicions to see the fact built up. "Robert, does this look like the letter of a married woman? Is it daughter-like—eh, man? Help another: I can't think for myself—she ties my hands. Speak out."

Robert set his eyes on Rhoda. He would

have given much to have been able to utter, "I do." Her face was like an eager flower straining for light; the very beauty of it swelled his jealous passion, and he flattered himself with his incapacity to speak an abject lie to propitiate her.

"She says she is married. We're bound to accept what she says."

That was his answer.

"*Is* she married?" thundered the farmer. "Has she been and disgraced her mother in her grave? What am I to think? She's my flesh and blood. Is she——"

"Oh, hush, father!" Rhoda laid her hand on his arm. "What doubt can there be of Dahlia? You have forgotten that she is always truthful. Come away. It is shameful to stand here and listen to unmanly things."

She turned a face of ashes upon Robert.

"Come away, father. She is our own. She is my sister. A doubt of her is an insult to us."

"But Robert don't doubt her—eh?" The farmer was already half distracted from his sus-

picions. Have you any real doubt about the girl, Robert?"

"I don't trust myself to doubt anybody," said Robert.

"You don't cast us off, my boy?"

"I'm a labourer on the farm," said Robert, and walked away.

"He's got reason to feel this more'n the rest of us, poor lad! It's a blow to him." With which the farmer struck his hand on Rhoda's shoulder. "I wish he'd set his heart on a safer young woman."

Rhoda's shudder of revulsion was visible as she put her mouth up to kiss her father's cheek.

CHAPTER VIII.

INTRODUCES MRS. LOVELL.

THAT is Wrexby Hall, up on the hill between Fenhurst and Wrexby: the white square mansion, with the lower drawing-room windows one full bow of glass against the sunlight, and great single trees spotting the distant green slopes. From Queen Anne's Farm you could read the hour by the stretching of their shadows. Squire Blancove, who lived there, was an irascible, gouty man, out of humour with his time, and beginning, alas for him! to lose all true faith in his Port, though, to do him justice, he wrestled hard with this great heresy. His friends perceived the decay in his belief sooner than he did himself. He was sour in the evening as in the morning. There was no chirp in him when the bottle went round. He had never one hour of a humane

mood to be reckoned on now. The day, indeed, is sad when we see the skeleton of the mistress by whom we suffer, but cannot abandon her. The Squire drank, knowing that the issue would be the terrific, curse-begetting twinge in his foot; but, as he said, he was a man who stuck to his habits. It was over his Port that he had quarrelled with his rector on the subject of hopeful Algernon, and the system he adopted with that young man. This incident has something to do with Rhoda's story, for it was the reason why Mrs. Lovell went to Wrexby Church, the spirit of that lady leading her to follow her own impulses, which were mostly in opposition. So, when perchance she visited the Hall, she chose not to accompany the Squire and his subservient guests to Fenhurst, but made a point of going down to the unoccupied Wrexby pew. She was a beauty, and therefore powerful; otherwise her act of nonconformity would have produced bad blood between her and the Squire.

It was enough to have done so in any case; for now, instead of sitting at home comfortably, and reading off the week's chronicle of sport

while he nursed his leg, the unfortunate gentleman had to be up and away to Fenhurst every Sunday morning, or who would have known that the old cause of his general abstention from Sabbath services lay in the detestable doctrine of Wrexby's rector?

Mrs. Lovell was now at the Hall, and it was Sunday morning after breakfast. The lady stood like a rival head among the other guests, listening, gloved and bonneted, to the bells of Wrexby, west of the hills, and of Fenhurst, north-east. The Squire came in to them, groaning over his boots, cross with his fragile wife, and in every mood for satire, except to receive it.

"How difficult it is to be gouty and *good!*" murmured Mrs. Lovell to the person next her.

"Well," said the Squire, singling out his enemy, "you're going to that fellow, I suppose, as usual—eh?"

"Not 'as usual,'" replied Mrs. Lovell, sweetly; "I wish it were!"

"Wish it were, do you?—you find him so entertaining? Has he got to talking of the fashions?"

"He talks properly; I don't ask for more." Mrs. Lovell assumed an air of meekness under persecution.

"I thought you were Low Church."

"Lowly *of* the Church, I trust you thought," she corrected him. "But, for that matter, any discourse, plainly delivered, will suit me."

"His elocution's perfect," said the Squire; "that is, before dinner."

"I have only to do with him before dinner, you know."

"Well, I've ordered a carriage out for you."

"That is very honourable and kind."

"It would be kinder if I contrived to keep you away from the fellow."

"Would it not be kinder to yourself," Mrs. Lovell swam forward to him in all tenderness, taking his hands, and fixing the swimming blue of her soft eyes upon him pathetically, "if you took your paper and your slippers, and awaited our return?"

The Squire felt the circulating smile about the room. He rebuked the woman's audacity with a frown; "'Tis my duty to set an example," he

said, his gouty foot and irritable temper now meeting in a common fire.

"Since you are setting an example," rejoined the exquisite widow, "I have nothing more to say."

The Squire looked what he dared not speak. A woman has half, a beauty has all the world with her when she is self-contained, and holds her place; and it was evident that Mrs. Lovell was not one to abandon her advantages. He snapped round for a victim, trying his wife first. Then his eyes rested upon Algernon.

"Well, here we are; which of us will you take?" he asked Mrs. Lovell in blank irony.

"I have engaged my cavalier, who is waiting, and will be as devout as possible." Mrs. Lovell gave Algernon a smile.

"I thought I hit upon the man," growled the Squire. "You're going in to Wrexby, sir! Oh, go, by all means, and I shan't be astonished at what comes of it. Like teacher, like pupil!"

"There!" Mrs. Lovell gave Algernon another smile. "You have to bear the sins of your

rector, as well as your own. Can you support it?"

The flimsy fine dialogue was a little above Algernon's level in the society of ladies; but he muttered, bowing, that he would endeavour to support it, with Mrs. Lovell's help, and this did well enough; after which, the slight strain on the intellects of the assemblage relaxed, and ordinary topics were discussed. The carriages came round to the door; gloves, parasols, and scent-bottles were securely grasped; whereupon the Squire, standing bare-headed on the steps, insisted upon seeing the party of the opposition off first, and waited to hand Mrs. Lovell into her carriage, an ironic gallantry accepted by the lady with serenity befitting the sacred hour.

"Ah! my pencil, to mark the text for you, Squire," she said, taking her seat; and Algernon turned back at her bidding, to get a pencil; and she, presenting a most harmonious aspect in the lovely landscape, reclined in the carriage as if, like the sweet summer air, she too were quieted by those holy bells, while the Squire stood, fuming, bare-headed, and with boiling

blood, just within the bounds of decorum on the steps. She was more than his match.

She was more than a match for most; and it was not a secret. Algernon knew it as well as Edward, or anyone. She was a terror to the soul of the youth, and an attraction. Her smile was the richest flattery he could feel; the richer, perhaps, from his feeling it to be a thing impossible to fix. He had heard tales of her; he remembered Edward's warning; but he was very humbly sitting with her now, and very happy.

"I'm in for it," he said to his fair companion; "no cheque for me next quarter, and no chance of an increase. He'll tell me I've got a salary. A salary! Good Lord! what a man comes to! I've done for myself with the Squire for a year."

"You must think whether you have compensation," said the lady, and he received it in a cousinly squeeze of his hand.

He was about to raise the lank, white hand to his lips.

"Ah!" she said, "there would be no com-

pensation to *me*, if that were seen;" and her dainty hand was withdrawn. "Now, tell me," she changed her tone. "How do the loves prosper?"

Algernon begged her not to call them "loves." She nodded and smiled.

"Your artistic admirations," she observed. "I am to see her in Church, am I not? Only, my dear Algy, don't go too far. Rustic beauties are as dangerous as Court Princesses. Where was it you saw her first?"

"At the Bank," said Algernon.

"Really! at the Bank! So your time there is not absolutely wasted. What brought her to London, I wonder?"

"Well, she has an old uncle, a queer old fellow, and he's a sort of porter—money porter—in the Bank, awfully honest, or he might half break it some fine day, if he chose to cut and run. She's got a sister, prettier than this girl, the fellows say; I've never seen her. I expect I've seen a portrait of her, though."

"Ah!" Mrs. Lovell musically drew him on. "Was she dark, too?"

"No, she's fair. At least, she is in the portrait."

"Brown hair; hazel eyes?"

"Oh—oh! You guess, do you?"

"I guess nothing, though it seems profitable. That Yankee betting man 'guesses,' and what heaps of money he makes by it!"

"I wish I did," Algernon sighed. "All my guessing and reckoning goes wrong. I'm safe for next spring, that's one comfort. I shall make twenty thousand next spring."

"On Templemore?"

"That's the horse. I've got a little on Tenpenny Nail as well. But I'm quite safe on Templemore; unless the Evil Principle comes into the field."

"Is he so sure to be against you, if he does appear?" said Mrs. Lovell.

"Certain!" ejaculated Algernon, in honest indignation.

"Well, Algy, I don't like to have him on my side. Perhaps I will take a share in your luck, to make it—? to make it?"—She played prettily as a mistress teasing her lap-dog to

jump for a morsel; adding: "Oh! Algy, you are not a Frenchman. To make it divine, sir! you have missed your chance."

"There's one chance I shouldn't like to miss," said the youth.

"Then, do not mention it," she counselled him. "And, seriously, I will take a part of your risk. I fear I am lucky, which is ruinous. We will settle that, by-and-by. Do you know, Algy, the most expensive position in the world is a widow's."

"You needn't be one very long," growled he.

"I'm so wretchedly fastidious, don't you see? And it's best not to sigh when we're talking of business, if you'll take me for a guide. So, the old man brought this pretty rustic Miss Rhoda to the Bank?"

"Once," said Algernon. "Just as he did with her sister. He's proud of his nieces; shows them and then hides them. The fellows at the Bank never saw her again."

"Her name is——?"

"Dahlia."

"Ah, yes! — Dahlia. Extremely pretty.

There are brown dahlias—dahlias of all colours. And the portrait of this fair creature hangs up in your chambers in town?"

"Don't call them my chambers," Algernon protested.

"Your cousin's, if you like. Probably Edward happened to be at the Bank when fair Dahlia paid her visit. Once seems to have been enough for both of you."

Algernon was unread in the hearts of women, and imagined that Edward's defection from Mrs. Lovell's sway had deprived him of the lady's sympathy and interest in his fortunes.

"Poor old Ned's in some scrape, I think," he said.

"Where is he?" the lady asked, languidly.

"Paris."

"Paris? How very odd! And out of the season, in this hot weather. It's enough to lead me to dream that he has gone over—one cannot realise why."

"Upon my honour!" Algernon thumped on his knee; "by jingo!" he adopted a less com-

promising interjection; "Ned's fool enough. My idea is, he's gone and got married."

Mrs. Lovell was lying back with the neglectful grace of incontestible beauty; not a line to wrinkle her smooth, soft features. For one sharp instant her face was all edged and puckered, like the face of a fair witch. She sat upright.

"Married! But how can that be when we none of us have heard a word of it?"

"I dare say you haven't," said Algernon; "and not likely to. Ned's the closest fellow of my acquaintance. He hasn't taken me into his confidence, you may be sure: he know's I'm too leaky. There's no bore like a secret! I've come to my conclusion in this affair by putting together a lot of little incidents and adding them up. First, I believe he was at the Bank when that fair girl was seen there. Secondly, from the description the fellows give of her, I should take her to be the original of the portrait. Next, I know that Rhoda has a fair sister who has run for it. And last, Rhoda has had a letter from her sister, to say she's

away to the Continent and is married. Ned's in Paris. Those are my facts, and I give you my reckoning of them."

Mrs. Lovell gazed at Algernon for one long meditative moment.

"Impossible," she exclaimed. "Edward has more brains than heart." And now the lady's face was scarlet. "How did this Rhoda, with her absurd name, think of meeting you to tell you such stuff? Indeed, there's a simplicity in some of these young women——." She said the remainder to herself.

"She's really very innocent and good," Algernon defended Rhoda. "She is. There isn't a particle of nonsense in her. I first met her in town, as I stated, at the Bank; just on the steps, and we remembered I had called a cab for her a little before; and I met her again by accident yesterday."

"You are only a boy in their hands, my cousin Algy!" said Mrs. Lovell.

Algernon nodded with a self-defensive knowingness. "I fancy there's no doubt her sister has written to her that she's married. It's

certain she has. She's a blunt sort of girl; not one to lie, not even for a sister or a lover, unless she had previously made up her mind to it. In that case, she wouldn't stick at much."

"But, do you know," said Mrs. Lovell—"do you know that Edward's father would be worse than yours over such an act of folly? He would call it an offence against common sense, and have no mercy for it. He would be vindictive on principle. This story of yours cannot be true. Nothing reconciles it."

"Oh, Sir Billy will be rusty; that stands to reason," Algernon assented. "It mayn't be true. I hope it isn't. But Ned has a madness for fair women. He'd do anything on earth for them. He loses his head entirely."

"That he may have been imprudent——." Mrs. Lovell thus blushingly hinted at the lesser sin of his deceiving and ruining the girl.

"Oh, it needn't be true," said Algernon; and with meaning, "Who's to blame if it is?"

Mrs. Lovell again reddened. She touched Algernon's fingers.

"His friends mustn't forsake him, in any case."

"By Jove! you are the right sort of woman," cried Algernon.

It was beyond his faculties to divine that her not forsaking of Edward might haply come to mean something disastrous to him. The touch of Mrs. Lovell's hand made him forget Rhoda in a twinkling. He detained it, audaciously, even until she frowned with petulance and stamped her foot.

There was over her bosom a large cameo-brooch, representing a tomb under a palm-tree, and the figure of a veiled woman with her head bowed upon the tomb. This brooch was falling, when Algernon caught it. The pin tore his finger, and in the energy of pain he dashed the brooch to her feet, with immediate outcries of violent disgust at himself and exclamations for pardon. He picked up the brooch. It was open. A strange, discoloured, folded substance lay on the floor of the carriage. Mrs. Lovell gazed down at it, and then at him, ghastly pale. He lifted it by one corner, and the diminutive

folded squares came out, revealing a bloody handkerchief.

Mrs. Lovell grasped it, and thrust it out of sight.

She spoke as they approached the church-door: "Mention nothing of this to a soul, or you forfeit my friendship for ever."

When they alighted, she was smiling in her old, affable manner.

CHAPTER IX.

ROBERT INTERVENES.

Some consideration for Robert, after all, as being the man who loved her, sufficed to give him rank as a more elevated kind of criminal in Rhoda's sight, and exquisite torture of the highest form was administered to him. Her faith in her sister was so sure that she could half pardon him for the momentary harm he had done towards Dahlia with her father; but, judging him by the lofty standard of one who craved to be her husband, she could not pardon his unmanly hesitation and manner of speech. The old and deep grievance in her heart as to what men thought of women, and as to the harshness of men, was stirred constantly by the remembrance of his irresolute looks, and his not having dared to speak nobly for Dahlia,

even though he might have had the knavery to think evil. As the case stood, there was still mischief to counteract. Her father had willingly swallowed a drug, but his suspicions only slumbered, and she could not instil her own vivid hopefulness and trust into him. Letters from Dahlia came regularly. The first from Lausanne, favoured Rhoda's conception of her as of a happy spirit resting at celestial stages of her ascent upward through spheres of ecstacy. Dahlia could see the snow-mountains in a flying glimpse; and again, peacefully seated, she could see the snow-mountains reflected in clear blue waters from her window, which, Rhoda thought, must be like heaven. On these inspired occasions, Robert presented the form of a malignant serpent in her ideas. Then Dahlia made excursions upon glaciers with her beloved, her helpmate, and had slippings and tumblings—little earthly casualties which gave a charming sense of reality to her otherwise miraculous flight. The Alps were crossed: Italy was beheld. A profusion of "Oh's!" described Dahlia's impressions of Italy; and "Oh!

the heat!" showed her to be mortal, notwithstanding the sublime exclamations. Como received the blissful couple. Dahlia wrote from Como:—

"Tell father that gentlemen in my Edward's position cannot always immediately proclaim their marriage to the world. There are reasons. I hope he has been very angry with me: then it will be soon over, and we shall be—but I cannot look back. I shall not look back till we reach Venice. At Venice, I know I shall see you all as clear as day; but I cannot even remember the features of my darling here."

Her Christian name was still her only signature.

The thin blue-and-pink paper, and the foreign postmarks—testifications to Dahlia's journey not being a fictitious event, had a singular deliciousness for the solitary girl at the Farm. At times, as she turned them over, she was startled by the intoxication of her sentiments, for the wild thought would come, that many, many whose passionate hearts she could feel as her own, were ready to abandon principle and the bondage to the hereafter, for such a

long, delicious gulp of divine life. Rhoda found herself more than once brooding on the possible case that Dahlia had done this thing.

The fit of languor came on her unawares, probing at her weakness, and blinding her to the laws and duties of earth, until her conscious womanhood checked it, and she sprang from the vision in a spasm of terror, not knowing how far she had fallen.

After such personal experiences, she suffered great longings to be with her sister, that the touch of her hand, the gaze of her eyes, the tone of Dahlia's voice, might make her sure of her sister's safety.

Rhoda's devotions in church were frequently distracted by the occupants of the Blancove pew. Mrs. Lovell had the habit of looking at her with an extraordinary directness, an expressionless dissecting scrutiny, that was bewildering and confusing to the country damsel. Algernon likewise bestowed marked attention on her. Some curious hints had been thrown out to her by this young gentleman on the day when he ventured to speak to her in the lane,

which led her to fancy distantly that he had some acquaintance with Dahlia's husband, or that he had heard of Dahlia.

It was clear to Rhoda that Algernon sought another interview. He appeared in the neighbourhood of the Farm on Saturdays, and on Sundays he was present in the church, sometimes with Mrs. Lovell, and sometimes without a companion. His appearance sent her quick wits travelling through many scales of possible conduct; and they struck one ringing note:—she thought that by the aid of this gentleman a lesson might be given to Robert's mean nature. It was part of Robert's punishment to see that she was not unconscious of Algernon's admiration.

The first letter from Venice consisted of a series of interjections in praise of the poetry of gondolas, varied by allusions to the sad smell of the low tide water, and the amazing quality of the heat; and then Dahlia wrote more composedly—

"Titian the painter lived here, and painted ladies, who sat to him without a bit of garment

on, and indeed, my darling, I often think it was more comfortable for the model than for the artist. Even modesty seems too hot a covering for human creatures here. The sun strikes me down. I am ceasing to have a complexion. It is pleasant to know that my Edward is still proud of me. He has made acquaintance with some of the officers here, and seems pleased at the compliments they pay me.

"They have nice manners, and white uniforms that fit them like a kid glove. I am Edward's 'resplendent wife.' A colonel of one of the regiments invited him to dinner (speaking English), 'with your resplendent wife.' Edward has no mercy for errors of language, and he would not take me. Ah! who knows how strange men are! Never think of being happy unless you can always be blind. I see you all at home—Mother Dumpling and all—as I thought I should when I was to come to Venice.

"Persuade—do persuade father that everything will be well. Some persons *are* to be

trusted. *Make* him feel it. I know that I am life itself to Edward. He has lived as men do, and he can judge, and he knows that there never was a wife who brought a heart to her husband like mine to him. He wants to think, or he wants to smoke, and he leaves me; but oh! when he returns, he can scarcely believe that he has me, his joy is so great. He looks like a glad, thankful child, and he has the manliest of faces. It is generally thoughtful; you might think it hard, at *first* sight.

"But you must be beautiful to please some men. You will laugh—I have really got the habit of talking to my face and all myself in the glass. Rhoda would think me cracked. And it is really true that I was never so humble about my good looks. You used to spoil me at home—you and that wicked old Mother Dumpling, and our own dear mother, Rhoda—oh, mother, mother! I wish I had always thought of you looking down on me! You made me so vain—much more vain than I let you see I was. There were times when it is quite true I thought myself a princess. I am not worse-looking now, but I

suppose I desire to be so beautiful that nothing satisfies me.

"A spot on my neck gives me a dreadful fright. If my hair comes out much when I comb it, it sets my heart beating; and it is a *daily* misery to me that my hands are larger than they should be, belonging to Edward's 'resplendent wife.' I thank Heaven that you and I always saw the necessity of being careful of our finger-nails. My feet are of moderate size, though they are not *French feet*, as Edward says. No: I shall never dance. He sent me to the dancing-master in London, but it was too late. But I have been complimented on my walking, and that seems to please Edward. He does not dance (or mind dancing) himself, only he does not like me to miss one perfection. It is his love. Oh! if I have seemed to let you suppose he does not love me as ever, do not think it. He is most tender and true to me. Addio! I am *signora*, you are signorina.

"They have such pretty manners to us over here. Edward says they think less of women: I say they think more. But I feel

he must be right. Oh, my dear, cold, loving innocent sister! put out your arms; I shall feel them round me, and kiss you, kiss you for ever!"

Onward from city to city, like a radiation of light from the old farm-house, where so little of it was, Dahlia continued her journey; and then, without a warning, with only a word to say that she neared Rome, the letters ceased. A chord snapped in Rhoda's bosom. While she was hearing from her sister almost weekly, her confidence was buoyed on a summer sea. In the silence it fell upon a dread. She had no answer in her mind for her father's unspoken dissatisfaction, and she had to conceal her cruel anxiety. There was an interval of two months: a blank full charged with apprehension that was like the humming of a toneless wind before storm; worse than the storm, for any human thing to bear.

Rhoda was unaware that Robert, who rarely looked at her, and never sought to speak a word to her when by chance they met and were alone, studied each change in her face, and read its signs. He was left to his own interpretation of

them, but the signs he knew accurately. He knew that her pride had sunk, and that her heart was desolate. He believed that she had discovered her sister's misery.

One day a letter arrived that gave her no joyful colouring, though it sent colour to her cheeks. She opened it, evidently not knowing the handwriting; her eyes ran down the lines hurriedly. After a time she went upstairs for her bonnet.

At the stile leading into that lane where Robert had previously seen her, she was stopped by him.

"No farther," was all that he said, and he was one who could have interdicted men from advancing.

"Why may I not go by you?" said Rhoda, with a woman's affected humbleness.

Robert joined his hands. "You go no farther, Miss Rhoda, unless you take me with you."

"I shall not do that, Mr. Robert."

"Then you had better return home."

"Will you let me know what reasons you have for behaving in this manner to me?"

"I'll let you know by-and-by," said Robert.

"At present, you'll let the stronger of the two have his way."

He had always been so meek and gentle and inoffensive, that her contempt had had free play, and had never risen to anger; but violent anger now surged against him, and she cried, "Do you dare to touch me?" trying to force her passage by.

Robert caught her softly by the wrist. There stood at the same time a full-statured strength of will in his eyes, under which her own fainted.

"Go back!" he said; and she turned that he might not see her tears of irritation and shame. He was treating her as a child; but it was to herself alone that she could defend herself. She marvelled that when she thought of an outspoken complaint against him, her conscience gave her no support.

"Is there no freedom for a woman at all in this world?" Rhoda framed the bitter question.

Rhoda went back as she had come. Algernon Blancove did the same. Between them stood Robert, thinking, "Now I have made that girl hate me for life."

It was in November that a letter, dated from London, reached the Farm, quickening Rhoda's blood anew. "I am alive," said Dahlia; and she said little more, except that she was waiting to see her sister, and bade her urgently to travel up alone. Her father consented to her doing so. After a consultation with Robert, however, he determined to accompany her.

"She can't *object* to see me too," said the farmer; and Rhoda answered "No." But her face was bronze to Robert when they took their departure.

CHAPTER X.

DAHLIA IS NOT VISIBLE.

Old Anthony was expecting them in London. It was now winter, and the season for theatres; so, to show his brother-in-law the fun of a theatre was one part of his projected hospitality, if Mr. Fleming should haply take the hint that he must pay for himself.

Anthony had laid out money to welcome the farmer, and was shy and fidgetty as a girl who anticipates the visit of a promising youth, over his fat goose for next day's dinner, and his shrimps for this day's tea, and his red slice of strong cheese, called of Cheshire by the reckless butterman, for supper.

He knew that both Dahlia and Rhoda must have told the farmer that he was not high up in Boyne's Bank, and it fretted him to think that

the mysterious respect entertained for his wealth by the farmer, which delighted him with a novel emotion, might be dashed by what the farmer might behold.

During his last visit to the Farm, Anthony had talked of the Funds more suggestively than usual. He had alluded to his own dealings in them, and to what he would do and would not do under certain contingencies; thus shadowing out, dimly luminous and immense, what he could do, if his sagacity prompted the adventure. The farmer had listened through the buzzing of his uncertain grief, only sighing for answer. "If ever you come up to London, brother William John," said Anthony, "you mind you go about arm-in-arm with me, or you'll be judging by appearances, and says you, 'Lor', what a thousander fellow this is!' and 'What a millioner fellow that is!' You'll be giving your millions and your thousands to the wrong people, when they haven't got a penny. All London 'll be topsy-turvy to you, unless you've got a guide, and he'll show you a shabby-coated, head-in-the gutter old man 'll buy up the lot. Everybody

that doesn't know him says—look at *him!* but they that knows him—hats off, I can tell you. And talk about lords! We don't mind their coming into the city, but they know the scent of cash. I've had a lord take off his hat to me. It's a fact, I have."

In spite of the extreme caution Anthony had impressed upon his country relative that he should not judge by appearances, he was nevertheless under an apprehension that the farmer's opinion of him, and the luxurious, almost voluptuous, enjoyment he had of it, were in peril. When he had purchased the well-probed fat goose, the shrimps, and the cheese, he was only half-satisfied. His ideas shot boldly at a bottle of wine, and he employed a summer-lighted evening in going a round of wine-merchants' placards, and looking out for the cheapest bottle he could buy. And he would have bought one—he had sealing-wax of his own and could have stamped it with the office-stamp of Boyne's Bank for that matter, to make it as dignified and costly as the vaunted red seals and green seals of the placards—he would have bought one,

had he not, by one of his lucky mental illuminations, recollected that it was within his power to procure an order to taste wine at the Docks, where you may get as much wine as you like out of big sixpenny glasses, and try cask after cask, walking down gas-lit paths between the huge bellies of wine which groan to be tapped and tried, that men may know them. The idea of paying two shillings and sixpence for one miserable bottle vanished at the richly-coloured prospect. "That'll show him something of what London is," thought Anthony; and a companion thought told him in addition that the farmer, with a skinful of wine, would emerge into the open air imagining no small things of the man who could gain admittance into those marvellous caverns. "By George! it's like a boy's story-book," cried Anthony, in his soul, and he chuckled over the vision of the farmer's amazement—acted it with his arms extended, and his hat unseated, and plunged into wheezy fits of laughter.

He met his guests at the station. Mr. Fleming was soberly attired in what, to An-

thony's London eye, was a curiosity costume; but the broad brim of the hat, the square cut of the brown coat, and the leggings, struck him as being very respectable, and worthy of a presentation at any bank in London.

"You stick to a leather purse, brother William John?" he inquired, with an artistic sentiment for things in keeping.

"I do," said the farmer, feeling seriously at the button over it.

"All right; I shan't ask ye to show it in the street," Anthony rejoined, and smote Rhoda's hand as it hung:

"Glad to see your old uncle—are ye?"

Rhoda replied, quietly, that she was, but had come with the principal object of seeing her sister.

"There!" cried Anthony, "you never get a compliment out of this gal. She gives ye the nut, and you're to crack it, and there may be, or there mayn't be, a kernel inside—*she* don't care."

"But there ain't much in it!" the farmer ejaculated, withdrawing his fingers from the

button they had been teasing for security since Anthony's question about the purse.

"Not much—eh! brother William John?" Anthony threw up a puzzled look. "Not much baggage—I see that!" he exclaimed; "and, Lord be thanked! no trunks. Aha, my dear"—he turned to Rhoda—"you remember your lesson, do ye? Now, mark me—I'll remember you for it. Do you know, my dear," he said to Rhoda confidentially, "that six-penn'orth of chaff which I made the cabman pay for—*there* was the cream of it!—that was better than Peruvian bark to my constitution. It was as good to me as a sniff of sea-breeze and no excursion expenses. I'd like another, just to feel young again, when I'd have backed myself to beat—cabmen? Ah! I've stood up, when I was a young 'un, and shut up a Cheap Jack at a fair. Circulation's the soul o' chaff. That's why I don't mind tackling cabmen—they sit all day, and all they've got to say is 'rat-tat,' and they've done. But I let the boys roar. I know what I was when a boy myself. I've got devil in me—never you fear—but it's all on

the side of the law. Now, let's off, for the gentlemen are starin' at you, which wont hurt ye, ye know, but makes me jealous."

Before the party moved away from the platform, a sharp tussle took place between Anthony and the farmer as to the porterage of the bulky bag; but it being only half-earnest, the farmer did not put out his strength, and Anthony had his way.

"I rather astonished you, brother William John," he said, when they were in the street.

The farmer admitted that he was stronger than he looked.

"Don't you judge by appearances, that's all," Anthony remarked, setting down the bag to lay his finger on one side of his nose for impressiveness.

"Now, there we leave London Bridge to the right, and we shoulder away to the left, and quiet parts." He seized the bag anew. "Just listen. That's the roaring of cataracts of gold you hear, brother William John. It's a good notion, ain't it? Hark!—I got that notion

from one of your penny papers. You can buy any amount for a penny, now-a-days—poetry up in a corner, stories, tales o' temptation—one fellow cut his lucky with his master's cash, dashed away to Australia, made millions, fit to be a lord, and there he was! liable to the law! and everybody bowing their hats and their heads off to him, and his knees knocking at the sight of a policeman—a man of a red complexion, full habit of body, enjoyed his dinner and his wine, and on account of his turning white so often, they called him—'Sealing-wax and Parchment' was one name; 'Carrots and turnips' was another; 'Blumonge and something," and so on. Fancy his having to pay *half* his income in pensions to chaps who could have had him out of his town or country mansion and popped into gaol in a jiffy. And found out at last! Them tales set you thinking. Once I was an idle young scaramouch. But you can buy every idea that's useful to you for a penny. I tried the halfpenny journals. Cheapness ain't always profitable. The moral

is, Make your money, and you may buy all the rest.

Discoursing thus by the way, and resisting the farmer's occasional efforts to relieve him of the bag, with the observation that appearances were deceiving, and that he intended, please his Maker, to live and turn over a little more interest yet, Anthony brought them to Mrs. Wicklow's house. Mrs. Wicklow promised to put them into the track of the omnibuses running towards Dahlia's abode in the south-west, and Mary Ann Wicklow, who had a burning desire in her bosom to behold even the outside shell of her friend's new grandeur, undertook very disinterestedly to accompany them. Anthony's strict injunction held them due at a lamp-post outside Boyne's Bank, at half-past three o'clock in the afternoon.

"My love to Dahly," he said. "She was always a head and shoulders over my size. Tell her when she rolls by in her carriage, not to mind me. I got my own notions of value. And if that Mr. Ayrton of hers 'll

bank at Boyne's, I'll behave to him like a customer. This here's the girl for my money." He touched Rhoda's arm, and so disappeared.

The farmer chid her for her cold manner towards her uncle, murmuring aside to her: "You heard what he said." Rhoda was frozen with her heart's expectation, and insensible to hints or reproof. The people who entered the omnibus seemed to her stale phantoms bearing a likeness to every one she had known, save to her beloved whom she was about to meet, after long separation.

She marvelled pityingly at the sort of madness which kept the streets so lively for no reasonable purpose. When she was on her feet again, she felt for the first time, that she was nearing the sister for whom she hungered, and the sensation beset her that she had landed in a foreign country. Mary Ann Wicklow chattered all the while to the general ear. It was her pride to be the discoverer of Dahlia's terrace.

"Not for worlds would she enter the house," she said, in a general tone; she knowing better than to present herself where downright entreaty did not invite her.

Rhoda left her to count the numbers along the terrace-walk, and stood out in the road that her heart might select Dahlia's habitation from the other hueless residences. She fixed upon one, but she was wrong, and her heart sank. The fair Mary Ann fought her and beat her by means of a careful reckoning, as she remarked:—

"*I* keep my eyes open; Number 15, is the corner house, the bow-window, to a certainty."

Gardens were in front of the houses; or, to speak more correctly, strips of garden-walks. A cab was drawn up close by the shrub-covered iron gate leading up to No 15. Mary Ann hurried them on, declaring that they might be too late even now at a couple of dozen paces distant, seeing that London cabs, crawlers as they usually were, could, when required, and paid for it, do their business like lightning.

Her observation was illustrated the moment after they had left her in the rear; for a gentleman suddenly sprang across the pavement, jumped into a cab, and was whirled away, with as much apparent magic to provincial eyes, as if a pantomimic trick had been performed. Rhoda pressed forward a step in advance of her father.

"It may have been her husband," she thought, and trembled. The curtains up in the drawing-room were moved as by a hand; but where was Dahlia's face? Dahlia knew that they were coming, and she was not on the look-out for them!—a strange conflict of facts, over which Rhoda knitted her black brows, so that she looked menacing to the maid opening the door, whose "Oh, if you please, Miss," came in contact with "My sister—Mrs. ——, she expects me. I mean, Mrs. ——" but no other name than "Dahlia" would fit itself to Rhoda's mouth.

"Ayrton," said the maid, and recommenced, "Oh, if you please, Miss, and you are the young lady, Mrs. Ayrton is very sorry, and have left

word, would you call again to-morrow, as she have made a pressing appointment, and was sure you would excuse her, but her husband was very anxious for her to go, and could not put it off, and was very sorry, but would you call again to-morrow at twelve o'clock? and punctually she would be here."

The maid smiled as one who had fairly accomplished the recital of her lesson. Rhoda was stunned.

"Is Mrs. Ayrton at home?—Not at home?" she said.

"No: don't ye hear?" quoth the farmer, sternly.

"She had my letter—do you know?" Rhoda appealed to the maid.

"Oh, yes, Miss. A letter from the country."

"This morning?"

"Yes, miss; this morning."

"And she has gone out? What time did she go out? When will she be in?"

Her father plucked at her dress. "Best not go making the young woman repeat herself.

She says, nobody's at home to ask us in. There's no more, then, to trouble her for."

"At twelve o'clock to-morrow?" Rhoda faltered.

"Would you, if you please, call again at twelve o'clock to-morrow, and punctually she would be here," said the maid.

The farmer hung his head and turned. Rhoda followed him from the garden. She was immediately plied with queries and interjections of wonderment by Miss Wicklow, and it was not until she said: "You saw *him* go out, didn't you?—into the cab?" that Rhoda awakened to a meaning in her gabble.

Was it Dahlia's husband whom they had seen? And if so, why was Dahlia away from her husband? She questioned in her heart, but not for an answer, for she allowed no suspicions to live. The farmer led on with his plodding country step, burdened shoulders, and ruddy-jowled, serious face, not speaking to Rhoda, who had no desire to hear a word from him, and let him be. Mary Ann steered him and called from behind the turnings he was to take,

while she speculated aloud to Rhoda upon the nature of the business that had torn Dahlia from the house so inopportunely. At last she announced that she knew what it was, but Rhoda failed to express curiosity. Mary Ann was driven to whisper something about strange things in the way of purchases. At that moment the farmer threw up his umbrella, shouting for a cab, and Rhoda ran up to him:

"Oh, father, why do we want to ride?"

"Yes, I tell ye!" said the farmer, chafing against his coat-collar.

"It is an expense, when we can walk, father."

"What do I care for th' expense? I shall ride." He roared again for a cab, and one came that took them in; after which, the farmer, not being spoken to, became gravely placid as before. They were put down at Boyne's Bank. Anthony was on the look-out, and signalled them to stand away some paces from the door. They were kept about a quarter of an hour waiting between two tides of wayfarers, which hustled them one way and another, when out, at last, came the

old, broad, bent figure, with little finicking steps, and hurried past them head foremost, his arms narrowed across a bulgy breast. He stopped to make sure that they were following, beckoned with his chin, and proceeded at a mighty rate. Marvellous was his rounding of corners, his threading of obstructions, his skilful diplomacy with passengers. Presently they lost sight of him, and stood bewildered; but while they were deliberating they heard his voice. He was above them, having issued from two swinging bright doors; and he laughed and nodded, as he ran down the steps, and made signs, by which they were to understand that he was relieved of a weight.

"I've done that twenty year of my life, brother William John," he said. "Eh? Perhaps you didn't guess I was worth some thousands when I got away from you just now? Let any chap try to stop me! They may just as well try to stop a railway train. Steam's up, and I'm off."

He laughed and wiped his forehead. Slightly

vexed at the small amount of discoverable astonishment on the farmer's face, he continued:

"You don't think much of it. Why, there ain't another man but myself Boyne's Bank would trust. They've trusted me thirty year:—why shouldn't they go on trusting me another thirty year? A good character, brother William John, goes on compound-interesting, just like good coin. Didn't you feel a sort of heat as I brushed by you—eh? That was a matter of one—two—three—four;" Anthony watched the farmer as his voice swelled up on the heightening numbers: "five—six—*six* thousand pounds, brother William John. People must think something of a man to trust him with that sum pretty near every day of their lives, Sundays excepted—eh? don't you think so?"

He dwelt upon the immense confidence reposed in him and the terrible temptation it would be to some men, and how they ought to thank their stars that they were never thrown in the way of such a temptation, of which he really thought nothing at all—nothing! until

the farmer's countenance was lightened of its air of oppression, for a puzzle was dissolved in his brain. It was now manifest to him that Anthony was trusted in this extraordinary manner because the heads and managers of Boyne's Bank knew the old man to be possessed of a certain very respectable sum: in all probability they held it in their coffers for safety and credited him with the amount. Nay, more; it was fair to imagine that the guileless old fellow, who conceived himself to be so deep, had let them get it all into their hands without any suspicion of their prominent object in doing so.

Mr. Fleming said, "Ah, yes, surely."

He almost looked shrewd as he smiled over Anthony's hat. The healthy exercise of his wits relieved his apprehensive paternal heart; and when he mentioned that Dahlia had not been at home when he called, he at the same time sounded his hearer for excuses to be raised on her behalf, himself clumsily suggesting one or two, as to show that he was willing to swallow a very little for comfort.

"Oh, of course!" said Anthony, jeeringly. "Out? If you catch her in, these next three or four days, you'll be lucky. Ah, brother William John!"

The farmer, half frightened by Anthony's dolorous shake of his head, exclaimed: "What's the matter, man?"

"How proud I should be if only you was in a way to bank at Boyne's!"

"Ah!" went the farmer in his turn, and he plunged his chin deep in his neckerchief.

"Perhaps some of your family will, some day, brother William John."

"Happen, some of my family do, brother Anthony!"

"*Will* is what I said, brother William John; if good gals, and civil, and marry decently—eh?" and he faced about to Rhoda who was walking with Miss Wicklow. "What does she look so down about, my dear? Never be down. I don't mind you telling your young man, whoever he is; and I'd like him to be a strapping young six-footer I've got in my eye, who farms. What does he farm with to make

farming answer now-a-days? Why, he farms with brains. You'll find that in my last week's Journal, brother William John, and thinks I, as I conned it—the farmer ought to read that! You may tell any young man you like, my dear, that your old uncle's fond of ye."

On their arrival home, Mrs. Wicklow met them with a letter in her hand. It was for Rhoda from Dahlia, saying that Dahlia was grieved to the heart to have missed her dear father and her darling sister. But her husband had insisted upon her going out to make particular purchases, and do a dozen things; and he was extremely sorry to have been obliged to take her away, but she hoped to see her dear sister and her father very, very soon. She wished she were her own mistress that she might run to them, but men when they are husbands require so much waiting on that she could never call five minutes her own. She would entreat them to call to-morrow, only she would then be moving to her new lodgings. "But, oh! my dear, my blessed Rhoda!" the letter concluded, "do keep fast in your heart that I do love you

so, and pray that we may meet soon, as I pray it every night and all day long. Beg father to stop till we meet. Things will soon be arranged. They must. Oh! oh, my Rhoda, love! how handsome you have grown. It is very well to be fair for a time, but the brunettes have the happiest lot. They last, and when we blonde ones cry or grow thin, oh! what objects we become!"

There were some final affectionate words, but no further explanation.

The wrinkles again settled on the farmer's mild, uncomplaining forehead.

Rhoda said: "Let us wait, father."

When alone, she locked the letter against her heart, as to suck the secret meaning out of it. Thinking over it was useless.

CHAPTER XI.

AN INDICATIVE DUET IN A MINOR KEY.

DAHLIA, the perplexity to her sister's heart, lay stretched at full length upon the sofa of a pleasantly furnished London drawing-room, sobbing to herself, with her handkerchief across her eyes. She had cried passion out, and sobbed now for comfort.

She lay in her rich silken dress like the wreck of a joyful creature, while the large red winter sun rounded to evening, and threw deep-coloured beams against the wall above her head. They touched the nut-brown hair to vivid threads of fire: but she lay faceless. Utter languor and the dread of looking at her eyelids in the glass kept her prostrate.

So, the darkness closed her about; the

sickly gas-lamps of the street showing her as a shrouded body.

A girl came in to spread the cloth for dinner, and went through her avocations with the stolidity of the London lodging-house maid-servant, poking a clogged fire to perdition, and mildly repressing a songful spirit.

Dahlia knew well what was being done; she would have given much to have saved her nostril from the smell of dinner; it was a great immediate evil to her sickened senses; but she had no energy to call out, nor will of any kind. The odours floated to her, and passively she combatted them.

At first she was nearly vanquished; the meat smelt so acrid, the potatoes so sour; each afflicting vegetable asserted itself peculiarly; and the bread, the salt even, on the wings of her morbid fancy, came steaming about her, subtle, penetrating, thick, and hateful, like the pressure of a cloud out of which disease is shot.

Such it seemed to her, till she could have

shrieked; but only a few fresh tears started down her cheeks, and she lay enduring it.

Dead silence and stillness hung over the dinner-service, when the outer door below was opened, and a light foot sprang up the stairs.

There entered a young gentleman in evening-dress, with a loose black wrapper drooping from his shoulders. He looked on the table, and then glancing at the sofa, said:

"Oh, there she is!" and went to the window and whistled.

After a minute of great patience, he turned his face back to the room again, and commenced tapping his foot on the carpet.

"Well?" he said, finding these indications of exemplary self-command unheeded. His voice was equally powerless to provoke a sign of animation. He now displaced his hat, and said, "Dahlia!"

She did not move.

"I am here to very little purpose then," he remarked.

A fluttering fall of her bosom was perceptible.

"For Heaven's sake, take away that handkerchief, my good child! Why have you let your dinner get cold? Here," he lifted a cover; "here's roast-beef. You like it—why don't you eat it? That's only a small piece of the general inconsistency, I know. And why haven't they put champagne on the table for you? You lose your spirits without it. If you took it when these moody fits came on—— but there's no advising a woman to do anything for her own good. Dahlia, will you do me the favour to speak two or three words with me before I go? I would have dined here, but I have a man to meet me at the club. Of what mortal service is it shamming the insensible? You've produced the required effect, I am as uncomfortable as I need be. Absolutely!

"Well," seeing that words were of no avail he summed up expostulation and reproach in this sigh of resigned philosophy: "I am going.

Let me see—I have my Temple keys?—yes! I am afraid that even when you are inclined to be gracious and look at me, I shall not be visible to you for some days. I start for Lord Elling's to-morrow morning at five. I meet my father there by appointment. I'm afraid we shall have to stay over Christmas. Good-bye." He paused. "Good-bye, my dear."

Two or three steps nearer the door, he said, "By the way, do you want anything? Money? —do you happen to want any money? I will send a blank cheque to-morrow. I have sufficient for both of us. I shall tell the landlady to order your Christmas dinner. How about wine? There is champagne, I know, and bottled ale. Sherry? I'll drop a letter to my wine-merchant; I think the sherry's running dry."

Her sense of hearing was now afflicted in as gross a manner as had been her sense of smell. She could not have spoken, though her vitality had pressed for speech. It would have astonished him to hear that his solicitude con-

cerning provender for her during his absence was not esteemed a kindness; for surely it is a kindly thing to think of it; and for whom but for one for whom he cared would he be counting the bottles to be left at her disposal, insomuch that the paucity of the bottles of sherry in the establishment distressed his mental faculties?

"Well, good-bye," he said finally. The door closed.

Had Dahlia's misery been in any degree simulated, her eyes now, as well as her ears, would have taken positive assurance of his departure. But with the removal of her handkerchief, the loathsome sight of the dinner-table would have saluted her, and it had already caused her suffering enough. She chose to remain as she was, saying to herself, "I am dead;" and softly revelling in that corpse-like sentiment. She scarcely knew that the door had opened again.

"Dahlia!"

She heard her name pronounced, and more entreatingly, and closer to her.

"Dahlia, my poor girl!" Her hand was pressed. It gave her no shudders.

"I am dead," she mentally repeated, for the touch did not run up to her heart and stir it.

"Dahlia, do be reasonable! I can't leave you like this. We shall be separated for some time. And what a miserable fire you've got here! You have agreed with me that we are acting for the best. It's very hard on me! I try what I can to make you comf——happy; and really, to see you leaving your dinner to get cold! Your hands are like ice. The meat wont be eatable. You know I'm not my own master. Come, Dahly, my darling!"

He gently put his hand to her chin, and then drew away the handkerchief.

Dahlia moaned at the exposure of her tear-stained face; she turned it languidly to the wall.

"Are you ill, my dear?" he asked.

Men are so considerately practical! He begged urgently to be allowed to send for a doctor.

But women, when they choose to be unhappy,

will not accept of practical consolations! She moaned a refusal to see the doctor.

Then what can I do for her? he naturally thought, and he naturally uttered it.

"Say good-bye to me," he whispered. "And my pretty one will write to me. I shall reply so punctually! I don't like to leave her at Christmas; and she will give me a line of Italian, and a little French—mind her accents, though!—and she needn't attempt any of the nasty German—*kshrra-kouzzra-kratz!*—which her pretty lips can't do, and wont do; but only French and Italian. Why, she learnt to speak Italian! '*La dolcezza ancor dentro me suona.*' Don't you remember, and made such fun of it at first? '*Amo zoo;*' '*no amo me?*' my sweet!

This was a specimen of the baby-lover talk, which is charming in its season, and may be pleasantly cajoling to a loving woman at all times, save when she is in Dahlia's condition. It will serve even then, or she will pass it forgivingly, as not the food she for the moment requires; but it must be purely simple in its utterance, otherwise she detects the poor chicanery, and resents the mean-

ness of it. She resents it with unutterable sickness of soul, for it is the language of what were to her the holiest hours of her existence, which is thus hypocritically used to blind and rock her in a cradle of deception. If corrupt, she may be brought to answer to it all the same, and she will do her part of the play, and babble words, and fret and pout deliciously; and the old days will seem to be revived, when both know they are dead; and she will thereby gain any advantage she is seeking.

But Dahlia's sorrow was deep: her heart was sound. She did not even perceive the opportunity offered to her for a wily performance. She felt the hollowness of his speech, and no more; and she said, "Good-bye, Edward."

He had been on one knee. Springing cheerfully to his feet, "Good-bye, darling," he said. "But I must see her sit to table first. Such a wretched dinner for her!" and he mumbled, "By Jove! I suppose I shan't get any at all myself!" His watch confirmed it to him that any dinner which had been provided for him at the club would be spoilt.

"Never mind," he said aloud, and examined the roast beef ruefully, thinking that, doubtless, it being more than an hour behind the appointed dinner-time at the club, his guest must now be gone.

For a minute or so he gazed at the mournful spectacle. The potatoes looked as if they had committed suicide in their own steam. There were mashed turnips, with a glazed surface, like the bright bottom of a tin pan. One block of bread was by the lonely plate. Neither hot nor cold; the whole aspect of the dinner-table resisted and repelled the gaze, and made no pretensions towards alluring it.

The thought of partaking of this repast endowed him with a critical appreciation of its character, and a gush of charitable emotion for the poor girl who had such miserable dishes awaiting her, arrested the philosophic reproof which he could have administered to one that knew so little how a dinner of any sort should be treated. He strode to the windows, pulled down the blind he had previously raised, rang the bell, and said:

"Dahlia, there—I'm going to dine with you, my love. I've rung the bell for more candles. The room shivers. That girl will see you, if you don't take care. Where is the key of the cupboard? We must have some wine out. The champagne, at all events, wont be flat."

He commenced humming the song of complacent resignation. Dahlia was still inanimate, but as the door was about to open, she rose quickly and fell in a tremble on the sofa, concealing her face.

An order was given for additional candles, coals, and wood. When the maid had disappeared, Dahlia got on her feet, and steadied herself by the wall, tottering away to her chamber.

"Ah, poor thing!" ejaculated the young man, not without an idea that the demonstration was unnecessary. For what is decidedly disagreeable is, in a young man's calculation concerning women, not necessary at all—quite the reverse. Are not women the flowers which decorate sublunary life? It is really irritating to discover them to be pieces of machinery that, for want of proper oiling, creak, stick, threaten convulsions,

and are tragic and stir us the wrong way. However, champagne does them good: an admirable wine—a sure specific for the sex!

He searched around for the keys to get at a bottle and uncork it forthwith. The keys were on the mantelpiece: a bad comment on Dahlia's housekeeping qualities; but in the hurry of action let it pass. He welcomed the candles gladly, and soon had all the cupboards in the room royally open.

Bustle is instinctively adopted by the human race as the substitute of comfort. He called for more lights, more plates, more knives and forks. He sent for ice: the maid observed that it was not to be had save at a distant street: "Jump into a cab—champagne's nothing without ice, even in winter," he said, and rang for her as she was leaving the house, to name a famous fishmonger who was sure to supply the ice.

The establishment soon understood that Mr. Ayrton intended dining within those walls. Fresh potatoes were put on to boil. The landlady came up herself to arouse the fire. The maid was for a quarter of an hour hovering between the order

to get ice and the execution of immediate commands. One was that she should take a glass of champagne to Mrs. Ayrton in her room. He drank off one himself. Mrs. Ayrton's glass being brought back untouched, he drank that off likewise, and as he became more exhilarated, was more considerate for her, to such a degree that, when she appeared he seized her hands and only jestingly scolded her for her contempt of sound medicine, declaring, in spite of her protestations, that she was looking lovely, and so they sat down to their dinner, she with an anguished glance at the looking-glass as she sank in her chair.

"It's not bad, after all," said he, drenching his tasteless mouthful of half-cold meat with champagne. "The truth is, that clubs spoil us. This is Spartan fare. Come, drink with me, my dearest. One sip."

She was coaxed by degrees to empty a glass. She had a gentle heart, and could not hold out long against a visible, lively kindliness. It pleased him that she should bow to him over fresh bubbles; and they went formally through the ceremony, and she smiled. He joked and laughed and

talked, and she eyed him with a faint sweetness. He perceived now that she required nothing more than the restoration of her personal pride, and setting bright eyes on her, hazarded a bold compliment.

Dahlia drooped like a yacht with idle sails struck by a sudden blast, that dips them in the salt; but she raised her face with the full bloom of a blush: and all was plain sailing afterwards.

"Has my darling seen her sister?" he asked softly.

Dahlia answered: "No," in the same tone.

Both looked away.

"She wont leave town without seeing you?"

"I hope—I don't know. She—she has called at our last lodgings twice."

"Alone?"

"Yes; I think so."

Dahlia kept her head down, replying; and his observation of her wavered uneasily.

"Why not write to her, then?"

"She will bring father."

The sob thickened in her throat; but, alas for him who had at first, while she was on the sofa, affected to try all measures to revive her, that I must declare him to know well how certain was his mastery over her, when his manner was thoroughly kind. He had not much fear of her relapsing at present.

"You can't see your father?"

"No."

"But, do. It's best."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Not——" she hesitated, and clasped her hands in her lap.

"Yes, yes; I know," said he; "but still! You could surely see him. You rouse suspicions that need not exist. Try another glass, my dear."

"No more."

"Well; as I was saying, you force him to think —and there is no necessity for it. He may be as hard on this point as you say; but now and then a little innocent deception may be practised.

We only require to gain time. You place me in a very hard position. I have a father too. He has his own ideas of things. He's a proud man, as I've told you; tremendously ambitious, and he wants to push me, not only at the bar, but in the money market matrimonial. All these notions I have to contend against. Things can't be done at once. If I give him a shock—well, we'll drop any consideration of the consequences. Write to your sister to tell her to bring your father. If they make particular inquiries—very unlikely I think—but, if they do, put them at their ease."

She sighed.

"Why was my poor darling so upset, when I came in?" said he.

There was a difficulty in her speaking. He waited with much patient twiddling of bread-crumbs; and at last she said:

"My sister called twice at my—our old lodgings. The second time, she burst into tears. The girl told me so."

"But women cry so often, and for almost anything, Dahlia."

"Rhoda cries with her hands closed hard, and her eyelids too."

"Well, that may be her way."

"I have only seen her cry once, and that was when mother was dying, and asked her to fetch a rose from the garden. I met her on the stairs. She was like wood. She hates crying. She loves me so."

The sympathetic tears rolled down Dahlia's cheeks.

"So, you quite refuse to see your father?" he asked.

"Not yet!"

"Not yet," he repeated.

At the touch of scorn in his voice, she exclaimed:

"Oh, Edward! not yet, I cannot. I know I am weak. I can't meet him now. If my Rhoda had come alone, as I hoped——! but he is with her. Don't blame me, Edward. I can't explain. I only know that I really have not the power to see him."

Edward nodded. "The sentiment some women put into things is inexplicable," he said.

"Your sister and father will return home. They will have formed their ideas. You know how unjust they will be. Since, however, the taste is for being a victim—eh?"

London lodging-house rooms in winter when the blinds are down, and a cheerless fire is in the grate, or when blinds are up and street-lamps salute the inhabitants with uncordial rays, are not entertaining places of residence for restless spirits. Edward paced about the room. He lit a cigar and puffed at it fretfully.

"Will you come and try one of the theatres for an hour?" he asked.

She rose submissively, afraid to say that she thought she should look ill in the staring lights; but he, with great quickness of perception, rendered her task easier by naming the dress she was to wear, the jewels, and the colour of the opera cloak. Thus prompted, Dahlia went to her chamber, and passively attired herself, thankful to have been spared the pathetic troubles of a selection of garments from her wardrobe; when she came forth, Edward thought her marvellously beautiful.

Pity that she had no strength of character whatever, nor any pointed liveliness of mind to match and wrestle with his own, and cheer the domestic hearth! But she was certainly beautiful. Edward kissed her hand in commendation. Though it was practically annoying that she should be sad, the hue and spirit of sadness came home to her aspect. Sorrow visited her tenderly-falling eyelids like a sister.

CHAPTER XII.

AT THE THEATRE.

EDWARD'S engagement at his club had been with his unfortunate cousin Algernon; who not only wanted a dinner but "five pounds or so" (the hazy margin which may extend illimitably, or miserably contract, at the lender's pleasure, and the necessity for which shows the borrower to be dancing on Fortune's tight-rope above the old abyss).

"Over claret," was to have been the time for the asking; and Algernon waited dinnerless until the healthy-going minutes distended and swelled monstrous and horrible as viper-bitten bodies, and the venerable Signior, Time, became of unhealthy hue. For this was the first dinner which, during the whole course of the young man's career,

had ever been failing to him! Reflect upon the mournful gap! He could scarcely believe in his ill-luck. He suggested it to himself with an inane grin, as one of the far-away freaks of circumstance that had struck him—and was it not comical?

He waited from the hour of six till the hour of seven. He compared clocks in the hall and the room. He changed the posture of his legs fifty times. For a while he wrestled right gallantly with the apparent menace of the Fates that he was to get no dinner at all that day; it seemed incredibly derisive, for, as I must repeat, it had never happened to him by any accident before. "You are born—you dine." Such appeared to him to be the positive regulation of affairs, and a most proper one:—of the matters of course following the birth of a young being.

By what frightful mischance, then, does he miss his dinner? By placing the smallest confidence in the gentlemanly feeling of another man! Algernon deduced this reply accurately

from his own experience, and whether it can be said by other 'undined' mortals, does not matter in the least. Perhaps, when keenly looked to, it will. But, we have nothing to do with the constitutionally luckless: the calamitous history of a simple empty stomach is enough. Here the tragedy is palpable. Indeed, too sadly so, and I dare apply but a flash of the microscope to the raging dilemmas of this animalcule. Five and twenty minutes had signalled their departure from the hour of seven, when Algernon pronounced his final verdict upon Edward's conduct by leaving the club. He returned to it a quarter of an hour later, and lingered on in desperate mood till eight.

He had neither watch in his pocket, nor ring on his finger, nor disposable stud in his shirt. The sum of twenty-one pence was in his possession, and, I ask you, as he asked himself, how is a gentleman to dine upon that? He laughed at the notion. The irony of Providence sent him by a cook's shop, where the mingled steam of meats and puddings rushed out upon the way-

farer like ambushed bandits, and seized him and dragged him in, or sent him qualmish and humbled on his way.

Two little boys had flattened their noses to the whiteness of winkles against the jealously misty windows. Algernon knew himself to be accounted a generous fellow, and remembering his reputation, he, as to hint at what Fortune might do in his case, tossed some coppers to the urchins, who ducked to the pavement and slid before the counter, in a flash, with never a 'thank ye,' or the thought of it.

Algernon was incapable of appreciating this childish faith in the beneficence of the unseen Powers who feed us, which, I must say for him, he had shared in a very similar manner only two hours ago. He laughed scornfully: "The little beggars!" considering in his soul that of such is humanity composed: as many a dinnerless man had said before, and will again, to point the speech of fools. He continued strolling on, comparing the cramped, misty London aspect of things with his visionary free dream of the glorious prairies, where his other life was: the

forests, the mountains, the endless expanses; the horses, the flocks, the slipshod ease of language and attire; and the grog-shops. Aha! There could be no mistake about him as a gentleman and a scholar out there! Nor would Nature shut up her pocket and demand innumerable things of him, as civilization did. This he thought in the vengefulness of his outraged mind.

Not only had Algernon never failed to dine every day of his life: he had no recollection of having ever dined without drinking wine. His conception did not embrace the idea of a dinner lacking wine. Possibly he had some embodied understanding that wine did not fall to the lot of every fellow upon earth: he had heard of gullets unrefreshed even by beer: but at any rate he himself was accustomed to better things, and he did not choose to excavate facts from the mass of his knowledge in order to reconcile himself to the miserable chop he saw for his dinner in the distance—a spot of meat in the arctic circle of a plate, not shone upon by any rosy-warming sun of a decanter!

But metaphorical language, though nothing

other will convey the extremity of his misery, or the form of his thoughts, must be put aside.

"Egad, and every friend I have is out of town!" he exclaimed, quite willing to think it part of the plot.

He stuck his hands in his pockets and felt vagabond-like and reckless. The streets were revelling in their winter muck. The carriages rolling by insulted him with their display of wealth.

He had democratic sentiments regarding them. O, for a horse upon the boundless plains! he sighed to his heart. He remembered bitterly how he had that day ridden his stool at the bank, dreaming of his wilds, where bailiff never ran, nor duns obscured the firmament.

And then there were theatres here—huge, extravagant places! Algernon went over to an entrance of one, to amuse his mind, cynically criticizing the bill. A play was going forward within that enjoyed great popular esteem: "The Holly Berries." Seeing that the pit was crammed, Algernon made application to learn

the state of the boxes, but hearing that one box was empty, he lost his interest in the performance.

As he was strolling forth, his attention was taken by a noise at the pit-doors, which swung open, and out tumbled a tough, little old man with a younger one grasping his coat-collar, who proclaimed that he would sicken him of pushing past him at the end of every act.

"You're precious fond of plays," sneered the junior.

"I'm fond of everything I pay for, young fellow," replied the shaken senior; "and that's a bit of enjoyment you've got to learn—ain't it?"

"Well, don't you knock by me again, that's all," cried the choleric youth.

"You don't think I'm likely to stop in your company, do you?"

"Whose expense have you been drinking at?"

"My country's, young fellow; and mind you don't soon *feed* at the table. Let me go."

Algernon's hunger was appeased by the prospect of some excitement, and seeing a vicious shake administered to the old man by the young one, he cried "Hands off!" and undertook policeman's duty; but as he was not in blue, his authoritative mandate obtained no respect until he had interposed his fist.

When he had done so, he recognised the porter of Boyne's Bank, whose enemy retired upon the threat that there should be no more pushing past him to get back to seats for the next act.

"I paid," said Anthony; "and you're a ticketer, and you ticketers shan't stop me. I'm worth a thousand of you. Holloa, sir," he cried to Algernon; "I didn't know you. I'm much obliged. These chaps get tickets given 'm, and grow as cocky in a theatre as men who pay. He never had such wine in him as I've got. That I'd swear. Ha! ha! I come out for an airing after every act, and there's a whole pitfull of ticketers yelling and tearing, and I chaff my way through and back clean as a redhot poker."

Anthony laughed, and rolled somewhat as he laughed.

"Come along, sir, into the street," he said, boring on to the pavement. "It's after office hours. And, ha! ha! what do you think? There's old farmer in there, afraid to move off his seat, and the girl with him, sticking to him tight, and a good girl too. *She* thinks we've had too much. We been to the Docks, wine-tasting: port—sherry: sherry—port! and, ha! ha! 'what a lot of wine!' says farmer, never thinking how much *he's* taking on board. 'I guessed it was night,' says farmer, as we got into the air, and to see him go on blinking, and stumbling, and saying to me 'You stand wine, brother Tony!' I'm blest if I ain't bottled laughter. So, says I, 'come and see "The Holly Berries," brother William John; it's the best play in London, and a suitable winter piece.' 'Is there a rascal hanged in the piece?' says he. 'Oh, yes!' I let him fancy there was, and he—ha! ha! old farmer's sticking to his seat, solemn as a judge, waiting for the gallows to come on the stage."

A thought quickened Algernon's spirit. It was a notorious secret among the young gentlemen who assisted in maintaining the prosperity of Boyne's Bank, that the old porter—the "Old Ant," as he was called—possessed money, and had no objection to put out small sums for a certain interest. Algernon mentioned casually that he had left his purse at home; and "by the way," said he, "have you got a few sovereigns in your pocket?"

"What! and come through that crush, sir?" Anthony negatived the question decisively with a reference to his general knowingness.

Algernon pressed him; saying at last, "Well, have you got one?"

"I don't think I've been such a fool," said Anthony, feeling slowly about his person, and muttering as to the changes that might possibly have been produced in him by the Docks.

"Confound it, I haven't dined!" exclaimed Algernon, to hasten his proceedings; but at this, Anthony eyed him queerly. "What have you been about then, sir?"

"Don't you see I'm in evening dress? I had

an appointment to dine with a friend. He didn't keep it. I find I've left my purse in my other clothes."

"That's a bad habit, sir," was Anthony's comment. "You don't care much for your purse."

"Much for my purse, be hanged!" interjected Algernon.

"You'd have felt it, or you'd have heard it, if there'd been any weight in it," Anthony remarked, shrewdly.

"How can you hear paper?"

"Oh, paper's another thing. You keep paper in your *mind*, don't you—eh? Forget pound notes? Leave pound notes in a purse? And you Sir William's nephew, sir, who'd let you bank with him and put down everything in a book, so that you couldn't forget, or if you did, he'd remember for you; and you might change your clothes as often as not, and no fear of your losing a penny."

Algernon shrugged disgustedly, and was giving the old man up as a bad business, when Anthony

altered his manner. "Oh! well, sir, I don't mind letting you have what I've got. I'm out for fun. Bother affairs!"

The sum of twenty shillings was handed to Algernon, after he had submitted to the indignity of going into a public-house, and writing his I. O. U. for twenty-three to Anthony Hackbut, which included interest. Algernon remonstrated against so needless a formality; but Anthony put the startling supposition to him, that he might die that night. He signed the document, and was soon feeding and drinking his wine. This being accomplished, he took some hasty puffs of tobacco, and returned to the theatre, in the hope that the dark girl Rhoda was to be seen there; for now that he had dined, Anthony's communication with regard to the farmer and his daughter became his uppermost thought, and a young man's uppermost thought is usually the propelling engine to his actions.

By good chance, and the aid of a fee, he obtained a front seat, commanding an excellent side-view of the pit, which sat wrapt in contem-

plation of a Christmas scene: snow, ice, bare twigs, a desolate house, and a woman shivering—one of man's victims.

It is a good public that of Britain, and will bear anything, so long as villany is punished, of which there was ripe promise in the oracular utterances of a rolling, stout, stage-sailor, whose nose, to say nothing of his frankness on the subject, proclaimed him his own worst enemy, and whose joke, by dint of repetition, had almost become the joke of the audience too; for whenever he appeared, there was agitation in pit and gallery, which subsided only on his jovial thundering of the familiar sentence; whereupon laughter ensued, and a quieting hum of satisfaction.

It was a play that had had a great run. Critics had once objected to it, that it was made to subsist on scenery, a song, and a stupid piece of cockneyism pretending to be a jest, that was really no more than a form of slapping the public on the back. But the public likes to have its back slapped, and critics, frozen by the Medusa-head of Success, were soon taught man-

ners. The office of critic is now, in fact, virtually extinct; the taste for tickling and slapping is universal and imperative; classic appeals to the intellect, and passions not purely domestic, have grown obsolete. There are captains of the legions, but no critics. The mass is lord.

And behold our friend the sailor of the boards, whose walk is even as two meeting billows, appears upon the lonely moor, and salts that uninhabited region with nautical interjections. Loose are his hose in one part, tight in another, and he smacks them. It is cold; so let that be his excuse for showing the bottom of his bottle to the glittering spheres. He takes perhaps a sturdier pull at the liquor than becomes a manifest instrument of Providence, whose services may be immediately required; but he informs us that his ship was never known not to right itself when called upon.

He is alone in the world, he tells us likewise. If his one friend, the uplifted flask, is his enemy, why then he feels bound to treat his enemy as his friend. This, with a pathetic allusion to his interior economy, which was applauded, and the

remark "Ain't that Christian?" which was just a trifle risky; so he secured pit and gallery at a stroke by a surpassingly shrewd blow at the bishops of our church, who are, it can barely be contested, in foul esteem with the multitude—none can say exactly for what reason—and must submit to be occasionally offered up as propitiatory sacrifices.

This good sailor was not always alone in the world. A sweet girl, whom he describes as reaching to his knee-cap, and pathetically believes still to be of the same height, once called him brother Jack. To hear that name again from her lips, and a particular song!—he attempts it ludicrously, yet touchingly withal.

Hark! Is it an echo from a spirit in the frigid air?

The song trembled with a silver ring to the remotest corners of the house.

At that moment the breathless hush of the audience was flurried by hearing "Dahlia" called from the pit.

Algernon had been spying among the close-packed faces for a sight of Rhoda. Rhoda was

now standing up amid gathering hisses and out-cries. Her eyes were bent on a particular box, across which a curtain was hastily being drawn. "My sister!" she sent out a voice of anguish, and remained with clasped hands and twisted eyebrows, looking passionately towards that one spot, as if she would have flown to it. A glance showed that she was wedged in the mass, and could not move.

The exclamation heard had belonged to brother Jack, on the stage, whose burst of fraternal surprise and rapture fell flat after it, to the disgust of numbers keenly awakened for the sentiment of this scene.

Roaring accusations that she was drunk; that she had just escaped from Bedlam for an evening; that she should be gagged and turned headlong out, surrounded her; but she stood like a sculptured figure, vital in her eyes alone. The farmer put his arm about his girl's waist. The instant, however, that Anthony's head uprose on the other side of her, the evil reputation he had been gaining for himself all through the evening produced a general clamour, over which the

gallery played, miauling, and yelping like dogs that are never to be divorced from a noise. Algernon feared mischief. He quitted his seat, and ran out into the lobby.

Half-a-dozen steps, and he came in contact with some one, and they were mutually drenched with water by the shock. It was his cousin Edward, bearing a glass in his hand.

Algernon's wrath at the sight of this offender was stimulated by the cold bath; but Edward cut him short.

"Go in there;" he pointed to a box-door. "A lady has fainted. Hold her up till I come."

No time was allowed for explanation. Algernon passed into the box, and was alone with an inanimate shape in a blue bournous. The uproar in the theatre raged; the whole pit was on its legs and shouting. He lifted the pallid head over one arm, miserably helpless and perplexed, but his anxiety concerning Rhoda's personal safety in that sea of strife prompted him to draw back the curtain a little, and he stood exposed. Rhoda perceived him. She motioned with both her hands in dumb supplication. In a moment the

curtain closed between them. Edward's sharp white face cursed him mutely for his folly, while he turned and put water to Dahlia's lips, and touched her forehead with it.

"What's the matter?" whispered Algernon.

"We must get her out as quick as we can. This is the way with women! Come! she's recovering." Edward nursed her sternly as he spoke.

"If she doesn't, pretty soon, we shall have the pit in upon us," said Algernon. "Is she that girl's sister?"

"Don't ask damned questions."

Dahlia opened her eyes, staring placidly.

"Now you can stand up, my dear. Dahlia! all's well. Try," said Edward.

She sighed, murmuring, "What is the time?" and again, "What noise is it?"

Edward coughed in a vexed attempt at tenderness, using all his force to be gentle with her as he brought her to her feet. The task was difficult amid the threatening storm in the theatre, and cries of "Show the young woman her sister!"

for Rhoda had won a party in the humane public.

"Dahlia, in God's name give me your help!" Edward called in her ear.

The fair girl's eyelids blinked wretchedly in protestation of her weakness. She had no will either way, and suffered herself to be led out of the box, supported by the two young men.

"Run for a cab," said Edward; and Algernon went ahead.

He had one waiting for them as they came out. They placed Dahlia on a seat with care, and Edward, jumping in, drew an arm tightly about her. "I can't cry," she moaned.

The cab was driving off as a crowd of people burst from the pit-doors, and Algernon heard the voice of Farmer Fleming, very hoarse. He had discretion enough to retire.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FARMER SPEAKS.

Robert was to drive to the station to meet Rhoda and her father returning from London, on a specified day. He was eager to be asking cheerful questions of Dahlia's health and happiness, so that he might dispel the absurd general belief that he had ever loved the girl, and was now regretting her absence; but one look at Rhoda's face when she stepped from the railway carriage kept him from uttering a word on that subject, and the farmer's heavier droop and acceptance of a helping hand into the cart, were signs of bad import.

Mr. Fleming made no show of grief, like one who nursed it. He took it to all appearance as patiently as an old worn horse would do, although such an outward submissiveness will not always indicate a placid spirit in men. He talked at

stale intervals of the weather and the state of the ground along the line of rail down home, and pointed in contempt or approval to a field here and there; but it was as one who no longer had any professional interest in the tilling of the land.

Doubtless he was trained to have no understanding of a good to be derived by his communicating what he felt and getting sympathy. Once, when he was uncertain, and a secret pride in Dahlia's beauty and accomplishments had whispered to him that her flight was possibly the opening of her road to a higher fortune, he made a noise for comfort, believing in his heart that she was still to be forgiven. He knew better now. By holding his peace he locked out the sense of shame which speech would have stirred within him.

"Got on pretty smooth with old Mas' Gammon?" he expressed his hope; and Robert said, "Capitally. We shall make something out of the old man yet, never fear."

Master Gammon was condemned to serve at the ready-set tea-table as a butt for banter;

otherwise it was apprehended well that Mrs. Sumfit would have scorched the ears of all present, save the happy veteran of the furrows, with repetitions of Dahlia's name, and wailings about her darling, of whom no one spoke. They suffered from her in spite of every precaution.

"Well, then, if I'm not to hear anything dooring meals—as if I'd swallow it and take it into my stomach!—I'll wait again for what ye've got to tell," she said, and finished her cup at a gulp, smoothing her apron afterwards.

The farmer then lifted his head.

"Mother, if you've done, you'll oblige me by going to bed," he said. "We want the kitchen."

"A-bed?" cried Mrs. Sumfit, with instantly ruffled lap.

"Upstairs, mother; when you've done—not before."

"Then bad's the noos! Something have happened, William. You'm not going to push me out? And my place is by the tea-pot, which I cling to, rememberin' how I seen her curly head grow by inches up above the table and the cups.

Mas' Gammon," she appealed to the sturdy feeder, "five cups is your number?"

Her hope was reduced to the prolonging of the service of tea, with Mr. Gammon's kind assistance.

"Four, marm," said her inveterate antagonist, as he finished that amount, and consequently put the spoon in his cup.

Mrs. Sumfit rolled in her chair.

"O Lord, Mas' Gammon! Five, I say; and never a cup less so long as here you've been."

"Four, marm. I don't know," said Master Gammon, with a slow nod of his head, "that ever I took five cups of tea at a stretch. Not runnin'."

"I *do* know, Mas' Gammon. And ought to; for don't I pour out to ye? It's five you take, and please, your cup, if you'll hand it over."

"Four's my number, marm," Master Gammon reiterated resolutely. He sat like a rock.

"If they was dumplins," moaned Mrs. Sumfit, "not four, no, nor five, 'd do till enough you'd had, and here we might stick to our chairs,

but you'd go on and on; you know you would."

"That's eatin', marm;" Master Gammon condescended to explain the nature of his habits. "I'm reg'lar in my drinkin'."

Mrs. Sumfit smote her hands together. "Oh Lord, Mas' Gammon, the wearisomest old man I ever come across is you. More tea's in the pot, and it ain't watery, and you wont be comfortable. May you get forgiveness from above! is all I say, and I say no more. Mr. Robert, perhaps you'll be so good as let me help you, sir? It's good tea; and my Dody," she added, cajolingly, "my home girl 'll tell us what she saw. I'm pinched and starved to hear."

"By-and-by, mother," interposed the farmer; "to-morrow." He spoke gently, but frowned.

Both Rhoda and Robert perceived that they were peculiarly implicated in the business which was to be discussed without Mrs. Sumfit's assistance. Her father's manner forbade Rhoda from making any proposal for the relief of the forlorn old woman.

"And me not to hear to-night about your

play-going!" sighed Mrs. Sumfit. "Oh, it's hard on me. I do call it cruel. And how my sweet was dressed—like as for a ball."

She saw the farmer move his foot impatiently.

"Then, if nobody drinks this remaining cup, I will," she pursued.

No voice save her own was heard till the cup was emptied, upon which Master Gammon, according to his wont, departed for bed to avoid the seduction of suppers, which he shunned as apoplectic, and Mrs. Sumfit prepared, in a desolate way, to wash the tea-things, but the farmer, saying that it could be done in the morning, went to the door and opened it for her.

She fetched a great sigh and folded her hands resignedly. As she was passing him to make her miserable enforced exit, the heavy severity of his face afflicted her with a deep alarm; she fell on her knees, crying—

"Oh, William! it ain't for sake of hearin' talk; but you, that went to see our Dahly, the blossom, 've come back streaky under the eyes,

and you make the house feel as if we neighboured Judgment Day. Down to tea you set the first moment, and me alone with none of you, and my love for my girl known well to you. And now to be marched off! *How* can I go a-bed and sleep, and my heart jumps so? It ain't Christian to ask me to. I got a heart, dear, I have. Do give a bit of comfort to it. Only a word of my Dahly to me."

The farmer replied: "Mother, let's have no woman's nonsense. What we've got to bear, let us bear. And you go on your knees to the Lord, and don't be a heathen woman, I say. Get up. There's a Bible in your bed-room. Find you out comfort in that."

"No, William, no!" she sobbed, still kneeling; "there ain't a dose o' comfort there when poor souls is in the dark, and haven't got patience for passages. And me and my Bible! —how can I read it, and not know my ailing, and astract one good word, William? It'll seem only the devil's shootin' black lightnings across the page, as poor blessed granny used to say, and she believed witches could do it to you in her

time, when they was evil-minded. No! To-night I look on the binding of the Holy Book, and I don't, and I won't, I shan't open it."

This violent end to her petition was wrought by the farmer grasping her arm to bring her to her feet.

"Go to bed, mother."

"I shan't open it," she repeated, defiantly. "And it ain't,"—she gathered up her comfortable, fat person to assist the words—"it ain't good—no, not the best pious ones—I shall, and will say it! as is al'ays ready to smack your face with the Bible.

"Now, don't ye be angry." She softened instantly.

"William, dear, I got fifty-seven pounds sterling, and odd shillings, in a savings-bank, and that I meant to go to Dahly, and not to yond' dark thing sitting there so sullen, and me in my misery; I'd give it to you now for news of my darlin'. Yes, William; and my poor husband's cottage, in Sussex—seventeen pound per annum. That, if you'll be goodness itself, and let me hear a word."

"Take her upstairs," said the farmer to Rhoda, and Rhoda went by her and took her hands, and by dint of pushing from behind and dragging in front, Mrs. Sumfit, as near on a shriek as one so fat and sleek could be, was ejected. The farmer and Robert heard her struggles and exclamations along the passage, but her resistance subsided very suddenly.

"There's power in that girl," said the farmer, standing by the shut door.

Robert thought so too. It affected his imagination and his heart began to beat sickeningly.

"Perhaps she promised to speak——what has happened, whatever that may be," he suggested.

"Not she; not she. She respects my wishes."

Robert did not ask what had happened.

Mr. Fleming remained by the door, and shut his mouth from a further word till he heard Rhoda's returning footstep. He closed the door again behind her, and went up to the square deal table, leaned his body forward on

the knuckles of his trembling fist, and said, "We're pretty well broken up, as it is. I've lost my taste for life."

There he paused. Save by the shining of a wet forehead, his face betrayed nothing of the anguish he suffered. He looked at neither of them, but sent his gaze straight away under labouring brows to an arm of the fireside chair, while his shoulders drooped on the wavering support of his hard-shut hands. Rhoda's eyes, ox-like, as were her father's, smote full upon Robert's, as in a pang of apprehension of what was about to be uttered.

It was a quick blaze of light, wherein he said that the girl's spirit was not with him. He would have stopped the farmer at once, but he had not the heart to do it, even had he felt in himself strength to attract an intelligent response from that strange, grave, bovine fixity of look, over which the human misery sat as a thing not yet taken into the dull brain.

"My taste for life," the old man resumed, "that's gone. I didn't bargain at set-out to go

on fighting agen the world. It's too much for a man o' my years. Here's the farm. Shall't go to pieces? I'm a farmer of twenty year back—twenty year back, and more. I'm about no better 'n a farm labourer in our time, which is to-day. I don't cost much. I ask to be fed, and to work for it, and to see my poor bit o' property safe, as handed to me by my father. Not for myself, 't ain't; though perhaps there's a bottom of pride there too, as in most things. Say it's for the name. My father seems to demand of me out loud, 'What ha' ye done with Queen Anne's Farm, William?' and there's a holler echo in my ears. Well; God wasn't merciful to give me a son. He give me daughters."

Mr. Fleming bowed his head as to the very weapon of chastisement.

"Daughters!" He bent lower.

His hearers might have imagined his headless address to them, to be also without a distinct termination, for he seemed to have ended as abruptly as he had begun; so long was the

pause before, with a wearied lifting of his body, he pursued, in a sterner voice:

"Don't let none interrupt me." His hand was raised as towards where Rhoda stood, but he sent no look with it; the direction was wide of her.

The aspect of the blank, blind hand motioning to the wall away from her, smote an awe through her soul that kept her dumb, though his next words were like thrusts of a dagger in her side.

"My first girl—she's brought disgrace on this house. She's got a mother in heaven, and that mother's got to blush for her. My first girl's gone to harlotry in London."

It was Scriptural severity of speech. Robert glanced quick with intense commiseration at Rhoda. He saw her hands travel upward till they fixed in at her temples and crossed fingers, making the pressure of an iron band for her head, while her lips parted, and teeth, and cheeks, and eyeballs were all of one whiteness. Her tragic, even, in and out breathing, where

there was no fall of the breast, but the air was taken and given, as it were the square blade of a sharp-edged sword, was dreadful to see. She had the look of a risen corpse, recalling some one of the bloody ends of life.

The farmer went on—

"Bury her! Now you here know the worst. There's my second girl. She's got no stain on her; if people 'll take her for what she is herself. She's idle. But I believe the flesh on her bones she'd wear away for anyone that touched her heart. She's a temper. But she's clean both in body and in spirit, as I believe, and say before my God. I—what I'd pray for is, to see this girl safe. All I have shall go to her. That is, to the man who will—wont be ashamed—marry her, I mean!"

The tide of his harshness failed him here, and he began to pick his words, now feeble, now emphatic, but alike wanting in natural expression, for he had reached a point of emotion upon the limits of his nature, and he was now wilfully forcing for misery and humiliation right

and left, in part to show what a black star Providence had been over him.

"She'll be grateful. I shall be gone. What disgrace I bring to their union, as father of the other one also, will, I'm bound to hope, be buried with me in my grave; so that this girl's husband shan't have to complain that her character and her working for him ain't enough to cover any harm he's like to think o' the connexion. And he wont be troubled by relationships after that.

"I used to think Pride a bad thing. I thank God we've all got it in our blood—the Flemings. I thank God for that now, I do. We don't face again them as we offend. Not, that is, with the hand out. We go. We're seen no more. And *she'll* be seen no more. On that, rely.

"I want my girl here not to keep me in the fear of death. For I fear death while she's not safe in somebody's hands—kind, if I can get him for her. Somebody—young or old!

The farmer lifted his head for the first time, and stared vacantly at Robert.

"I'd marry her," he said, "if I was knowing myself dying now or to-morrow morning, I'd marry her, rather than leave her alone; I'd marry her to that old man, old Gammon."

The farmer pointed to the ceiling. His sombre seriousness cloaked and carried even that suggestive indication to the possible bridegroom's age and habits, and all things associated with him, through the gates of ridicule; and there was no laughter, and no thought of it.

"It stands to reason for me to prefer a young man for her husband. He'll farm the estate, and wont sell it; so that it goes to our blood, if not to a Fleming. If, I mean, he's content to farm soberly, and not play Jack o' Lantern tricks across his own acres. Right in one thing's right, I grant; but don't argue right in all. It's right only in *one* thing. Young men, when they've made a true hit or so, they're ready to think it's themselves that's right."

This was of course a reminder of the old feud with Robert, and sufficiently showed whom the farmer had in view for a husband to Rhoda, if any doubt existed previously.

Having raised his eyes, his unwonted power of speech abandoned him, and he concluded, wavering in look and in tone—

"I'd half forgotten her uncle. I've reckoned his riches when I cared for riches. I can't say th' amount; but, all—I've had his word for it—all goes to this—God knows how much! —girl. And he don't hesitate to say she's worth a young man's fancying. May be so. It depends upon ideas mainly, that does. All goes to her. And this farm.—I wish ye good-night."

He gave them no other sign, but walked in his oppressed way quietly to the inner door, and forth, leaving the rest to them.

CHAPTER XIV.

BETWEEN RHODA AND ROBERT.

The two were together, and all preliminary difficulties had been cleared for Robert to say what he had to say, in a manner to make the saying of it well-nigh impossible. And yet his silence might be misinterpreted by her. He would have drawn her to his heart at one sign of tenderness. There came none. The girl was frightfully torn with a great wound of shame. She was the first to speak.

"Do you believe what father says of my sister?"

"That she ——?" Robert swallowed the words. "No!" and he made a thunder with his fist.

"No!" She drank up the word. "You do

not? No! You know that Dahlia is innocent?"

Rhoda was trembling with a look for the asseveration; her pale face eager as a cry for life; but the answer did not come at once, hotly as her passion for it demanded. She grew rigid, murmuring faintly: "Speak! Do speak!"

His eyes fell away from hers. Sweet love would have wrought in him to think as she thought, but she kept her heart closed from him, and he stood sadly judicial, with a conscience of his own, that would not permit him to declare Dahlia innocent, for he had long been imagining the reverse.

Rhoda pressed her hands convulsively, moaning "Oh!" down a short, deep breath.

"Tell me what has happened?" said Robert, made mad by that reproachful agony of her voice. "I'm in the dark. I'm not equal to you all. If Dahlia's sister wants one to stand up for her, and defend her, whatever she has done or not done, ask me. Ask me, and I'll revenge her. Here am I, and I know nothing, and you

despise me because——don't think me rude or unkind. This hand is yours, if you will. Come, Rhoda. Or, let me hear the case, and I'll satisfy you as best I can. Feel for her? I feel for her as you do. You don't want me to stand a liar to your question? How can I speak?"

A woman's instinct at red heat pierces the partial disingenuousness which Robert could only have avoided by declaring the doubts he entertained. Rhoda desired simply to be supported by his conviction of her sister's innocence, and she had scorn of one who would not chivalrously advance upon the risks of right and wrong, and rank himself prime champion of a woman belied, absent, and so helpless. Besides, there was but one virtue possible in Rhoda's ideas, as regarded Dahlia:—to oppose facts, if necessary, and have her innocent perforce, and fight to the death them that dared cast slander on the beloved head.

Her keen instinct served her so far.

His was alive when she refused to tell him what had taken place during their visit to London.

She felt that a man would judge evil of the circumstances. Her father and her uncle had done so: she felt that Robert would. Love for him would have prompted her to confide in him absolutely. She was not softened by love; there was no fire on her side to melt and make them run in one stream, and they could not meet.

"Then, if you will not tell me," said Robert, "say what you think of your father's proposal? He meant that I may ask you to be my wife. He used to fancy I cared for your sister. That's false. I care for her—yes; as my sister too; and here is my hand to do my utmost for her, but I love you, and I've loved you for some time. I'd be proud to marry you and help on with the old farm. You don't love me yet—which is a pretty hard thing for me to see to be certain of. But I love you, and I trust you. I like the stuff you're made of—and nice stuff I'm talking to a young woman," he added, wiping his forehead at the idea of the fair, flattering addresses young women expect when they are being wooed.

As it was, Rhoda listened with savage con-

tempt of his idle talk. Her brain was beating at the mystery and misery wherein Dahlia lay engulphed. She had no understanding for Robert's sentimentality, or her father's requisition. Some answer had to be given, and she said:—

"I'm not likely to marry a man who supposes he has anything to pardon."

"I don't suppose it," cried Robert.

"You heard what father said."

"I heard what he said, but I don't think the same. What has Dahlia to do with you?"

He was proceeding to rectify this unlucky sentence. All her covert hostility burst out on it.

"My sister?—what has my sister to do with me?—you mean!—you mean!—you can only mean that we are to be separated and thought of as two people; and we are one, and will be till we die. I feel my sister's hand in mine, though she's away and lost. She is my darling for ever and ever! We're one! we're one!"

A spasm of anguish checked the girl.

"I mean," Robert resumed steadily, "that her conduct, good or bad, doesn't touch you. If it did, it'd be the same to me. I ask you to take me for your husband. Just reflect on what your father said, Rhoda."

The horrible utterance her father's lips had been guilty of flashed through her, filling her with mastering vindictiveness, now that she had a victim.

"Yes! I'm to take a husband to remind me of what he said."

Robert eyed her sharpened mouth admiringly; her defence of her sister had excited his esteem, wilfully though she rebutted his straightforward earnestness: and he had a feeling also for the easy turns of her neck, and the confident poise of her figure.

"Ha! well!" he interjected, with his eyebrows queerly raised, so that she could make nothing of his look. It seemed half maniacal, it was so ridged with bright eagerness.

"By Heaven! the task of taming you—that's the blessing I'd beg for in my prayers! Though you were as wild as a cat of the woods, by

Heaven! I'd rather have the taming of you than go about with a leash of quiet," he checked himself —— "companions."

Such was the sudden roll of his tongue, that she was simply lost in the astounding lead he had taken, and stared.

"You're the beauty to my taste, and Devil is what I want in a woman! I can make something out of a girl with a temper like yours. You don't know me, Miss Rhoda. I'm what you reckon a good young man. Isn't that it?"

Robert drew up with a very hard smile.

"I would to God I were! Mind, I feel for you about your sister. I like you the better for holding to her through thick and thin. But my sheepishness has gone, and I tell you I'll have you whether you will or no. I can help you and you can help me. I've lived here as if I had no more fire in me than old Gammon snoring on his pillow up aloft; and who kept me to it? Did you see I never touched liquor? What did you guess from that?—that I was a mild sort of fellow? So I am: but I haven't got that reputation in other parts. Your father'd

like me to marry you, and I'm ready. Who kept me to work, so that I might learn to farm, and be a man, and be able to take a wife? I came here—I'll tell you how. I was a useless dog. I ran from home and served as a trooper. An old aunt of mine left me a little money, which just woke me up and gave me a lift of what conscience I had, and I bought myself out.

"I chanced to see your father's advertisement—came, looked at you all, and liked you—brought my traps and settled among you, and lived like a good young man. I like peace and orderliness, I find. I always thought I did, when I was dancing like mad to hell. I know I do now, and you're the girl to keep me to it. I've learnt that much by degrees. With any other, I should have been playing the fool, and going my old ways, long ago. I should have wrecked her, and drunk to forget. You're my match. By-and-by, you'll know me yours! You never gave me, or anybody else that I've seen, sly sidelooks.

"Come! I'll speak out now I'm at work. I thought you at some girl's games in the

summer. You went out one day to meet a young gentleman. Offence or no offence, I speak and you listen. You did go out. I was in love with you then, too. I saw London had been doing its mischief. I was down about it. I felt that he would make nothing of you, but I chose to take the care of you, and you've hated me ever since.

"That Mr. Algernon Blancove's a rascal. Stop! You'll say as much as you like presently. I give you a warning—the man's a rascal. I didn't play spy on your acts, but your looks. I can read a face like yours, and it's my home, my home!—by Heaven, it is. Now, Rhoda, you know a little more of me. Perhaps I'm more of a man than you thought. Marry another, if you will; but I'm the man for you, and I know it, and you'll go wrong if you don't too. Come! let your father sleep well. Give me your hand."

All through this surprising speech of Robert's, which was a revelation of one who had been previously dark to her, she had steeled her spirit as she felt herself being borne upon un-

expected rapids, and she marvelled when she found her hand in his.

Dismayed, as if caught in a trap, she said:

"You know I've no love for you at all."

"None—no doubt," he answered.

The fit of verbal energy was expended, and he had become listless, though he looked frankly at her and assumed the cheerfulness which was failing within him.

"I wish to remain as I am," she faltered, surprised again by the equally astonishing recurrence of humility, and more spiritually subdued by it. "I've no heart for a change. Father will understand. I am safe!"

She ended with a cry: "Oh! my dear, my own sister! I wish you were safe. Get her here to me, and I'll do what I can, if you're not hard on her. She's so beautiful, she can't do wrong. My Dahlia's in some trouble. Mr. Robert, you might really be her friend?"

"Drop the Mister," said Robert.

"Father will listen to you," she pleaded. "You wont leave us? Tell him you know I

"Yes," Rhoda gasped, "you are. You are only a brute."

"A brute's a lucky dog, then, for I've got you!"

"Will you touch me?"

"You're in my power."

"It's a miserable thing, Robert."

"Why don't you struggle, my girl? I shall kiss you in a minute."

"You're never my friend again."

"I'm not a gentleman, I suppose!"

"Never! after this."

"It isn't done. And first you're like a white rose, and next you're like a red. Will you submit?"

"Oh! shame!" Rhoda muttered.

"Because I'm not a gentleman?"

"You are not."

"So, if I could make you a lady—eh? the lips 'd be ready in a trice. You think of being made a lady—a lady!"

His arm relaxed in the clutch of her figure.

She got herself free, and said: "We saw Mr. Blancove at the theatre with Dahlia."

thought I was? I'm just what you choose to make me, Rhoda; remember that. By Heaven! go at once, for you're an armful——"

She took a candle and started for the door.

"Aha! you can look fearful as a doe. Out! make haste!"

In her hurry at his speeding gestures, the candle dropped; she was going to pick it up, but as he approached, she stood away frightened.

"One kiss, my girl," he said. "Don't keep me jealous as fire. One! and I'm a plighted man. One!—or I shall swear you know what kisses are. Why did you go out to meet that fellow? Do you think there's no danger in it? Doesn't he go about boasting of it now, and saying—that girl! But kiss me and I'll forget it; I'll forgive you. Kiss me only once, and I shall be certain you don't care for him. That's the thought maddens me outright. I can't bear it now I've seen you look soft. I'm stronger than you, mind." He caught her by the waist.

CHAPTER XV.

A VISIT TO WREXBY HALL.

NEXT day, while Squire Blancove was superintending the laying down of lines for a new carriage drive in his park, as he walked slowly up the green slope, he perceived Farmer Fleming, supported by a tall young man; and when the pair were nearer, he had the gratification of noting likewise that the worthy yeoman was very much bent, as with an acute attack of his well-known chronic malady of a want of money.

The Squire greatly coveted the freehold of Queen Anne's Farm. He had made offers to purchase it till he was tired, and had gained for himself the credit of being at the bottom of numerous hypothetical cabals to injure and oust the farmer from his possession. But if Naboth

came with his vineyard in his hand, not even Wrexby's rector (his quarrel with whom haunted every turn of his life) could quote Scripture against him for taking it at a proper valuation.

The Squire had employed his leisure time during service in church to discover a text that might be used against him in the event of the farmer's reduction to a state of distress, and his, the Squire's, making the most of it. On the contrary, according to his heathenish reading of some of the patriarchal doings, there was more to be said in his favour than not, if he increased his territorial property; nor could he, throughout the Old Testament, hit on one sentence that looked like a personal foe to his projects, likely to fit into the mouth of the rector of Wrexby.

"Well, farmer," he said, with cheerful familiarity, "winter crops looking well? There's a good show of green in the fields from my windows, as good as that land of yours will allow in heavy seasons."

To this the farmer replied, "I've not heart or will to be roundabout, Squire. If you'll listen to me—here, or where you give command."

"Has it anything to do with pen and paper, Fleming? In that case you'd better be in my study," said the Squire.

"I don't know that it have. I don't know that it have." The farmer sought Robert's face.

"Best where there's no chance of interruption," Robert counselled, and lifted his hat to the Squire.

"Eh? Well, you see I'm busy." The latter affected a particular indifference that, in such cases, when well-acted (as lords of money can do —Squires equally with usurers), may be valued at hundreds of pounds in the pocket. "Can't you put it off? Come again to-morrow."

"To-morrow's a day too late," said the farmer, gravely. Whereto replying, "Oh! well, come along in, then," the Squire led the way.

"You're two to one, if it's a transaction," he said, nodding to Robert to close the library door. "Take seats. Now then, what is it? And if I make a face, just oblige me by thinking nothing about it, for my gout's beginning to settle

in the leg again, and shoots like an electric telegraph from purgatory."

He wheezed and lowered himself into his arm-chair; but the farmer and Robert remained standing, and the farmer spoke:—

"My words are going to be few, Squire. I've got a fact to bring to your knowledge, and a question to ask."

Surprise, exaggerated on his face by a pain he had anticipated, made the Squire glare hideously.

"Confound it, that's what they ask a prisoner in the box. Here's a murder committed:—Are you the guilty person? Fact and question! Well, out with 'em, both together."

"A father ain't responsible for the sins of his children," said the farmer.

"Well, that's a fact," the Squire emphasized. "I've always maintained it; but, if you go to your church, farmer—small blame to you if you don't—that fellow who preaches there—I forget his name—stands out for just the other way. You *are* responsible, he swears. Pay your son's debts, and don't groan over it:—*He* spent the money, and *you're* the chief debtor;

that's his teaching. Well; go on. What's your question?"

"A father's not to be held responsible for the sins of his children, Squire. My daughter's left me. She's away. I saw my daughter at the theatre in London. She saw me, and saw her sister with me. She disappeared. It's a hard thing for a man to be saying of his own flesh and blood. She disappeared. She went, knowing her father's arms open to her. She was in company with your son."

The Squire was thrumming on the arm of his chair. He looked up vaguely, as if waiting for the question to follow, but meeting the farmer's settled eyes, he cried, irritably, "Well, what's that to me?"

"What's that to you, Squire?"

"Are you going to make me out responsible for my son's conduct? My son's a rascal—everybody knows that. I paid his debts once, and I've finished with him. Don't come to me about the fellow. If there's a greater curse than gout, it's a son."

"My girl," said the farmer, "she's my flesh

and blood, and I must find her, and I'm here to ask you to make your son tell me where she's to be found. Leave me to deal with that young man—leave you me! but I want my girl."

"But I can't give her to you," roared the Squire, afflicted by his two great curses at once. "Why do you come to me? I'm not responsible for the doings of the dog. I'm sorry for you, if that's what you want to know. Do you mean to say that my son took her away from your house?"

"I don't do so, Mr. Blancove. I'm seeking for my daughter, and I see her in company with your son."

"Very well, very well," said the Squire; "that shows his habits; I can't say more. But what has it got to do with me?"

The farmer looked helplessly at Robert.

"No, no," the Squire sung out, "no interlopers, no interpreting here. I listen to you. My son—your daughter. I understand that, so far. It's between us two. You've got a daughter who's gone wrong somehow: I'm sorry to hear

it. I've got a son who never went right; and it's no comfort to me, upon my word. If you were to see the bills and the letters I receive! but I don't carry my grievances to my neighbours. I should think, Fleming, you'd do best, if it's advice you're seeking, to keep it quiet. Don't make a noise about it. Neighbours' gossip *I* find pretty well the worst thing a man has to bear who's unfortunate enough to own children."

The farmer bowed his head with that bitter humbleness which characterized his reception of the dealings of Providence towards him.

"My neighbours 'll soon be none at all," he said. "Let 'em talk. I'm not abusing you, Mr. Blancove. I'm a broken man: but I want my poor lost girl, and, by God, responsible for your son or not, you must help me to find her."

The Squire hastily seized a scrap of paper on the table and wrote on it.

"There;" he handed the paper to the farmer; "that's my son's address, 'Boyne's Bank, City, London.' Go to him there, and you'll find him perched on a stool, and a good drubbing wont

hurt him. You've my hearty permission, I can assure you: you may say so. 'Boyne's Bank.' Anybody will show you the place. He's a rascally clerk in the office, and precious useful, I dare swear. Thrash him, if you think fit."

"Ay," said the farmer, "Boyne's Bank. I've been there already. He's absent from work, on a visit down into Hampshire, one of the young gentlemen informed me; Fairly Park was the name of the place: but I came to you, Mr. Blancove; for you're his father."

"Well now, my good Fleming, I hope you think I'm properly punished for that fact." The Squire stood up with horrid contortions.

Robert stepped in advance of the farmer.

"Pardon me, sir," he said, though the Squire met his voice with a prodigious frown; "this would be an ugly business to talk about, as you observe. It would hurt Mr. Fleming in these parts of the country, and he would leave it, if he thought fit; but you can't separate your name from your son's—begging you to excuse the liberty I take in mentioning it—not in public; and your son

has the misfortune to be well known in one or two places where he was quartered when in the cavalry. That matter of the jeweller——"

"Hulloa," the Squire exclaimed, in a perturbation.

"Why, sir, I know all about it, because I was a trooper in the regiment your son, Mr. Algernon Blancove, quitted; and his name, if I may take leave to remark so, wont bear printing. How far he's guilty before Mr. Fleming we can't tell as yet; but if Mr. Fleming holds him guilty of an offence, your son 'll bear the consequences, and what's done will be done thoroughly. Proper counsel will be taken, as needn't be said. Mr. Fleming applied to you first, partly for your sake as well as his own. He can find friends, both to advise and to aid him."

"You mean, sir," thundered the Squire, "that he can find enemies of mine, like that infernal fellow who goes by the title of Reverend, down below there. That 'll do, that will do; there's some extortion at the bottom of this. You're putting on a screw."

"We're putting on a screw, sir," said Robert, coolly.

"Not a penny will you get by it."

Robert flushed with heat of blood.

"You don't wish you were a young man half so much as I do just now," he remarked, and immediately they were in collision, for the Squire made a rush to the bell-rope, and Robert stopped him. "We're going," he said; "we don't want man-servants to show us the way out. Now mark me, Mr. Blancove, you've insulted an old man in his misery: you shall suffer for it, and so shall your son, whom I know to be a rascal worthy of transportation. You think Mr. Fleming came to you for money. Look at this old man, whose only fault is that he's too full of kindness; he came to you just for help to find his daughter, with whom your rascal of a son was last seen, and you swear he's come to rob you of money. Don't you know yourself a fattened cur, Squire though you be, and called gentleman? England's a good place, but you make England a hell to men of spirit. Sit in your chair, and don't ever you, or any of you,

cross my path; and speak a word to your servants before we're out of the house, and I stand in the hall and give 'em your son's history, and make Wrexby stink in your nostril, till you're glad enough to fly out of it. Now, Mr. Fleming, there's no more to be done here; the game lies elsewhere."

Robert took the farmer by the arm, and was marching out of the enemy's territory in good order, when the Squire, who had presented many changing aspects of astonishment and rage, arrested them with a call. He began to say that he spoke to Mr. Fleming, and not to the young ruffian of a bully whom the farmer had brought there: and then asked in a very reasonable manner what he could do—what measures he could adopt to aid the farmer in finding his child. Robert hung modestly in the background while the farmer laboured on with a few sentences to explain the case, and finally the Squire said that, his foot permitting (it was an almost pathetic reference to the weakness of flesh), he would go down to Fairly on the day following and have a personal interview with his son, and

set things right, as far as it lay in his power, though he was by no means answerable for a young man's follies.

He was a little frightened by the farmer's having said that Dahlia, according to her own declaration, was married, and therefore himself the more anxious to see Mr. Algernon, and hear the truth from his estimable offspring, whom he again stigmatized as a curse terrible to him as his gouty foot, but nevertheless just as little to be left to his own devices. The farmer bowed to these observations; as also when the Squire counselled him, for his own sake, not to talk of his misfortune all over the parish.

"I'm not a likely man for that, Squire; but there's no telling where gossips get their crumbs. It's about. It's about."

"About my son?" cried the Squire.

"My daughter!"

"Oh, well, good day," the Squire resumed more cheerfully. "I'll go down to Fairly, and you can't ask more than that."

When the farmer was out of the house and out of hearing, he rebuked Robert for the incon-

siderate rashness of his behaviour, and pointed out how he, the farmer, by being patient and peaceful, had attained to the object of his visit. Robert laughed without defending himself.

"I shouldn't ha' known ye," the farmer repeated frequently; "I shouldn't ha' known ye, Robert."

"No, I'm a trifle changed, may be," Robert agreed. "I'm going to claim a holiday of you. I've told Rhoda that if Dahlia's to be found, I'll find her, and I can't do it by sticking here. Give me three weeks. The land's asleep. Old Gammon can hardly turn a furrow the wrong way. There's nothing to do, which is his busiest occupation, when he's not interrupted at it."

"Mas' Gammon's a rare old man," said the farmer, emphatically.

"So I say. Else, how would you see so many farms flourishing!"

"Come, Robert: you hit th' old man hard: you should learn to forgive."

"So I do, and a telling blow's a man's best road to charity. I'd forgive the Squire and

many another, if I had them within two feet of my fist."

"Do you forgive my girl Rhoda for putting of you off?"

Robert screwed in his cheek.

"Well, yes, I do;" he said. "Only it makes me feel thirsty, that's all."

The farmer remembered this when they had entered the farm.

"Our beer's so poor, Robert," he made apology; "but Rhoda shall get you some for you to try, if you like. Rhoda, Robert's solemn thirsty."

"Shall I?" said Rhoda, and she stood awaiting his bidding.

"I'm not a thirsty subject," replied Robert. "You know I've avoided drink of any kind since I set foot on this floor. But when I drink," he pitched his voice to a hard, sparkling heartiness, "I drink a lot, and the stuff must be strong. I'm very much obliged to you, Miss Rhoda, for what you're so kind as to offer to satisfy my thirst, and you can't give better, and don't suppose that I'm complaining; but your father's right, it *is*

rather weak, and wouldn't break the tooth of my thirst if I drank at it till Gammon left off thinking about his dinner."

With that he announced his approaching departure.

The farmer dropped into his fireside chair, dumb and spiritless. A shadow was over the house, and the inhabitants moved about their domestic occupations silent as things that feel the thunder-cloud. Before sunset Robert was gone on his long walk to the station, and Rhoda felt a woman's great envy of the liberty of a man, who has not, if it pleases him not, to sit and eat grief among familiar images, in a home that furnishes its altar-flame.

CHAPTER XVI.

AT FAIRLY PARK.

FAIRLY,' Lord Elling's seat in Hampshire, lay over the Warbeach river; a white mansion among great oaks, in view of the summer sails and winter masts of the yachting squadron. The house was ruled, during the congregation of the Christmas guests, by charming Mrs. Lovell, who relieved the invalid Lady of the house of the many serious cares attending the reception of visitors, and did it all with ease. Under her sovereignty the place was delightful, and if it was by repute pleasanter to young men than to any other class, it will be admitted that she satisfied those who are loudest in giving tongue to praise.

Edward and Algernon journeyed down to Fairly together, after the confidence which the astute young lawyer had been compelled to repose

in his cousin. Sir William Blancove was to be at Fairly, and it was at his father's pointed request that Edward had accepted Mrs. Lovell's invitation. Half in doubt as to the lady's disposition towards him, Edward eased his heart with sneers at the soft, sanguinary graciousness they were to expect, and racked mythology for spiteful comparisons; while Algernon vehemently defended her with a battering fire of British adjectives in superlative. He as much as hinted, under instigation, that he was entitled to defend her; and his claim being by-and-by yawningly allowed by Edward, and presuming that he now had Edward in his power and need not fear him, he exhibited his weakness in the guise of a costly gem, that he intended to present to Mrs. Lovell—an opal set in a cross pendant from a necklace; a really fine opal, coquetting with the lights of every gem that is known: it shot succinct red flashes, and green, and yellow; the emerald, the amethyst, the topaz lived in it, and a remote ruby; it was veined with lightning hues, and at times it slept in a milky cloud, innocent of fire, quite maidenlike.

"That will suit her," was Edward's remark.

"I didn't want to get anything common," said Algernon, making the gem play before his eyes.

"A pretty stone," said Edward.

"Do you think so?"

"Very pretty indeed."

"Harlequin pattern."

"To be presented to Columbine!"

"The Harlequin pattern is of the best sort, you know. Perhaps you like the watery ones best? This is fresh from Russia. There's a set I've my eye on. I shall complete it in time. I want Peggy Lovell to wear the jolliest opals in the world. It's rather nice, isn't it?"

"It's a splendid opal," said Edward.

"She likes opals," said Algernon.

"She'll take your meaning at once," said Edward.

"How? I'll be hanged if I know what my meaning is, Ned."

"Don't you know the signification of your gift?"

"Not a bit."

"Oh! you'll be Oriental when you present it."

"The deuce I shall!"

"It means, 'You're the prettiest widow in the world.'"

"So she is. I'll be right there, old boy."

"And, 'You're a rank, right-down widow, and no mistake: you're everything to everybody; not half so innocent as you look: you're green as jealousy, red as murder, yellow as jaundice, and put on the whiteness of a virgin when you ought to be blushing like a penitent.' In short, 'You have no heart of your own, and you pretend to possess half a dozen: you're devoid of one steady beam, and play tricks with every scale of colour: you're an arrant widow, and that's what you are.' An eloquent gift, Algy."

"Gad, if it means all that, it'll be rather creditable to me," said Algernon. "Do opals mean widows?"

"Of course," was the answer.

"Well, she is a widow, and I suppose she's going to remain one, for she's had lots of offers. If I marry a girl I shall never like her half as much as Peggy Lovell. She's done me up for every other woman living. She never lets me feel a fool with her; and she has a way, by Jove,

of looking at me, and letting me know she's up to my thoughts and isn't angry. What's the use of my thinking of her at all? *She'd* never go to the Colonies, and live in a log-hut and make cheeses, while I tore about on horseback, gathering cattle."

"I don't think she would," observed Edward, emphatically; "I don't think she would."

"And I shall never have money. Confound stingy parents! It's a question whether I shall get Wrexby: there's no entail. I'm heir to the governor's temper and his gout, I dare say. He'll do as he likes with the estate. I call it beastly unfair."

Edward asked how much the opal had cost.

"Oh, nothing," said Algernon; "that is, I never pay for jewellery."

Edward was curious to know how he managed to obtain it.

"Why, you see," Algernon explained, "they, the jewellers—I've got two or three in hand—the fellows are acquainted with my position, and they speculate on my expectations. There is no harm in that if they like it. I look at their trinkets, and

say, 'I've no money;' and they say, 'Never mind;' and I don't mind much. The understanding is, that I pay them when I inherit."

"In gout and bad temper?"

"Gad, if I inherit nothing else, they'll have lots of that for indemnification. It's a good system, Ned; it enables a young fellow like me to get through the best years of his life—which I take to be his youth—without that squalid poverty bothering him. You can make presents, and wear a pin or a ring, if it takes your eye. You look well, and you make yourself agreeable; and I see nothing to complain of in that."

"The jewellers, then, have established an institution to correct one of the errors of Providence."

"Oh! put it in your long-winded way, if you like," said Algernon; "all I know is, that I should often have wanted a five pound note, if—that is, if I hadn't happened to be dressed like a gentleman. With your prospects, Ned, I should propose to charming Peggy to-morrow morning early. We mustn't let her go out of the family. If I can't have her, I'd rather you would."

"You forget the incumbrances on one side," said Edward, his face darkening.

"Oh! that's all to be managed," Algernon rallied him. "Why, Ned, you'll have twenty-thousand a-year, if you have a penny; and you'll go into Parliament, and give dinners, and a woman like Peggy Lovell 'd intrigue for you like the deuce."

"A great deal too like," Edward muttered.

"As for that pretty girl," continued Algernon; but Edward peremptorily stopped all speech regarding Dahlia. His desire was, while he made holiday, to shut the past behind a brazen gate; which being communicated sympathetically to his cousin, the latter chimed to it in boisterous shouts of anticipated careless jollity at Fairly Park, crying out how they would hunt and snap fingers at Jews, and all mortal sorrows, and have a fortnight, or three weeks, perhaps a full month, of the finest life possible to man, with good horses, good dinners, good wines, good society, at command, and a queen of a woman to rule and order everything. Edward affected a dis-

dainful smile at the prospect; but was in reality the weaker of the two in his thirst for it.

They arrived at Fairly in time to dress for dinner, and in the drawing-room Mrs. Lovell sat to receive them. She looked up to Edward's face an imperceptible half-second longer than the ordinary form of a welcome accords—one of the looks which are nothing at all when there is no spiritual apprehension between young people, and are so much when there is. To Algernon, who was gazing opals on her, she simply gave her fingers. At her right hand, was Sir John Capes, her antique devotee; a pure, milky white old gentleman, with sparkling fingers, who played Apollo to this Daphne, and was out of breath. Lord Suckling, a boy with a boisterous constitution, and a guardsman, had his place near her left hand, as if ready to seize it at the first whisper of encouragement or opportunity. A very little lady of seventeen, Miss Adeline Gosling, trembling with shyness under a cover of demureness, fell to Edward's lot to conduct down to dinner, where he neglected her disgracefully. His father, Sir William, was pre-

sent at the table, and Lord Elling, with whom he was in repute as a talker and a wit. Quickened with his host's renowned good wine (and the bare renown of a wine is inspiriting), Edward pressed to be brilliant. He had an epigrammatic turn, and though his mind was prosaic when it ran alone, he could appear inventive and fanciful with the rub of other minds. Now, at a table where good talking is cared for, the triumphs of the excelling tongue are not for a moment to be despised, even by the huge appetite of the monster, Vanity. For a year, Edward had abjured this feast. Before the birds appeared and the champagne had ceased to make its circle, he felt that he was now at home again, and that the term of his wandering away from society was one of folly. He felt the joy and vigour of a creature returned to his element. Why had he ever quitted it? Already he looked back upon Dahlia from a prodigious distance. He knew that there was something to be smoothed over; something written in the book of facts which had to be smeared out, and he seemed to do it, while he drank the babbling wine and

heard himself talk. Not one man at that table, as he reflected, would consider the bond which held him in any serious degree binding. A lady is one thing, and a girl of the class Dahlia had sprung from altogether another. He could not help imagining the sort of appearance she would make there; and the thought even was a momentary clog upon his tongue. How he used to despise these people! Especially he had despised the young men as brainless cowards in regard to their views of women and conduct towards them. All that was changed. He fancied now that they, on the contrary, would despise him, if only they could be aware of the lingering sense he entertained of his being in bondage under a sacred obligation to a farmer's daughter.

But he had one thing to discover, and that was, why Sir William had made it a peculiar request that he should come to meet him here. Could the desire possibly be to reconcile him with Mrs. Lovell? His common sense rejected the idea at once. Sir William boasted of her wit and tact, and admired her beauty, but Edward

remembered his having responded tacitly to his estimate of her character, and Sir William was not the man to court the alliance of his son with a woman like Mrs. Lovell. He perceived that his father and the fair widow frequently took counsel together. Edward laughed at the notion that the grave senior had himself become fascinated, but without utterly scouting it, until he found that the little lady whom he had led to dinner the first day, was an heiress; and from that, and other indications, he exactly divined the nature of his father's provident wishes. But this revelation rendered Mrs. Lovell's behaviour yet more extraordinary. Could it be credited that she was abetting Sir William's schemes with all her woman's craft? "Has she," thought Edward, "become so indifferent to me as to care for my welfare?" He determined to put her to the test. He made love to Adeline Gosling. Nothing that he did disturbed the impenetrable complacency of Mrs. Lovell. She threw them together as she shuffled the guests. She really seemed to him quite indifferent enough to care for his welfare. It was a point in the mysterious

ways of woman, or of widows, that Edward's experience had not yet come across. All the parties immediately concerned were apparently so desperately acquiescing in his suit, that he soon grew uneasy. Mrs. Lovell not only shuffled him into places with the raw heiress, but with the child's mother; of whom he spoke to Algernon as of one too strongly breathing of matrimony to appease the cravings of an eclectic mind.

"Make the path clear for *me*, then," said Algernon, "if you don't like the girl. Pitch her tales about me. Say, I've got a lot in me, though I don't let it out. The game's up between you and Peggy Lovell, that's clear. She don't forgive you, my boy."

"Ass!" muttered Edward, seeing by the light of his perception, that he was too thoroughly forgiven.

A principal charm of the life at Fairly to him was that there was no one complaining. No one looked reproach at him. If a lady was pale and reserved, she did not seem to accuse him, and to require coaxing. All faces here were as light as the flying moment, and did not carry

the shadowy weariness of years, like that burdensome fair face in the London lodging-house, to which the Fates had terribly attached themselves. So, he was gay. He closed, as it were, a black volume, and opened a new and a bright one. Young men easily fancy that they may do this, and that when the black volume is shut the tide is stopped. Saying, "I was a fool," they believe they have put an end to the foolishness. What father teaches them that a human act once set in motion flows on for ever to the great account? Our deathlessness is in what we do, not in what we are. Comfortable youth thinks otherwise.

The days at a well-ordered country-house, where a divining lady rules, speed to the measure of a waltz, in harmonious circles, dropping like crystals into the gulfs of Time, and appearing to write nothing in his book. Not a single hinge of existence is heard to creak. There is no after-dinner bell. You are waited on, without being elbowed by the humanity of your attendants. It is a civilized Arcadia. Only, do not desire, that you may not envy. Accept humbly what rights of citizenship are accorded to you

upon entering. Discard the passions when you cross the threshold. To breathe and to swallow merely, are the duties which should prescribe your conduct; or, such is the swollen condition of the animal in this enchanted region, that the spirit of man becomes dangerously beset.

Edward breathed and swallowed, and never went beyond the prescription, save by talking. No other junior could enter the library, without encountering the scorn of his elders; so he enjoyed the privilege of hearing all the scandal, and his natural cynicism was plentifully fed. It was more of a school to him than he knew.

These veterans, in their arm-chairs, stripped the bloom from life, and showed it to be bare bones. They took their wisdom for an experience of the past: they were but giving their sensations in the present. Not to perceive this, is youth's error when it hears old gentlemen talking at their ease.

On the third morning of their stay at Fairly, Algernon came into Edward's room with a letter in his hand.

"There! read that!" he said. "It isn't ill-

luck; its infernal persecution! What, on earth! —why, I took a close cab to the station. You saw me get out of it. I'll swear no creditor of mine knew I was leaving London. My belief is that the fellows who give credit have spies about at every railway terminus in the kingdom. They won't give me three days' peace. It's enough to disgust any man with civilized life; on my soul, it is!"

Edward glanced at the superscription of the letter. "Not posted," he remarked.

"No; delivered by some confounded bailiff, who's been hounding me."

"Bailiffs don't generally deal in warnings."

"*Will* you read it!" Algernon shouted.

The letter ran thus:

"Mr. Algernon Blancove;

"The writer of this intends taking the first opportunity of meeting you, and gives you warning, you will have to answer his question with a Yes or a No; and speak from your conscience. The respectfulness of his behaviour to you as a gentleman will depend upon that."

Algernon followed his cousin's eye down to the last letter in the page.

"What do you think of it?" he asked eagerly.

Edward's broad, thin-lined brows were drawn down in gloom. Mastering some black meditation in his brain, he answered Algernon's yells for an opinion:—

"I think—well, I think bailiffs have improved in their manners, and show you they are determined to belong to the social march in an age of universal progress. Nothing can be more comforting."

"But, suppose this fellow comes across me?"

"Don't know him."

"Suppose he insists on knowing me?"

"Don't know yourself."

"Yes; but hang it! if he catches hold of me?"

"Shake him off."

"Suppose he won't let go?"

"Cut him with your horsewhip."

"You think it's about a debt, then?"

"Intimidation, evidently."

"I shall announce to him that the great

Edward Blancove is not to be intimidated. You'll let me borrow your name, old Ned. I've stood by you in my time. As for leaving Fairly, I tell you I can't. It's too delightful to be near Peggy Lovell."

Edward smiled with a peculiar friendliness, and Algernon went off, very well contented with his cousin.

CHAPTER XVII.

A YEOMAN OF THE OLD BREED.

WITHIN a mile of Fairly Park lay the farm of a another yeoman; but he was of another character. The Hampshireman was a farmer of renown in his profession; fifth of a family that had cultivated a small domain of one hundred and seventy acres with sterling profit, and in a style to make Sutton the model of a perfect farm throughout the country. Royal eyes had inspected his pigs approvingly; Royal wits had taken hints from Jonathan Eccles in matters agricultural; and it was his comforting joke that he had taught his Prince good breeding. In return for the service, his Prince had transformed a lusty radical into a devoted royalist. Framed on the walls of his parlours were letters from his Prince, thanking him for

specimen seeds and worthy counsel: veritable autograph letters of the highest value. The Prince had steamed up the salt river, upon which the Sutton harvests were mirrored, and landed on a spot marked in honour of the event by a broad grey stone; and from that day Jonathan Eccles stood on a pinnacle of pride, enabling him to see horizons of despondency hitherto unknown to him. For he had a son, and the son was a riotous devil, a most wild young fellow, who had no taste for a farmer's life, and openly declared his determination not to perpetuate the Sutton farm in the hands of the Eccles's, by running off one day and entering the ranks of the British army.

Those framed letters became melancholy objects for contemplation, when Jonathan thought that no posterity of his would point them out gloryingly in emulation. Man's aim is to culminate; but it is the saddest thing in the world to feel that we have accomplished it. Mr. Eccles shrugged with all the philosophy he could summon, and transferred his private disappointment to his country,

whose agricultural day was, he said, doomed. "We shall be beaten by those Yankees." He gave Old England twenty years of continued pre-eminence (due to the impetus of the present generation of Englishmen), and then, said he, the Yankees will flood the market. No more green pastures in Great Britain; no pretty, clean-footed animals; no yellow harvests; but huge chimney pots everywhere; black earth under black vapour, and smoke-begrimed faces. In twenty years' time, sooty England was to be a gigantic manufactory, until the Yankees beat us out of that field as well; beyond which Jonathan Eccles did not care to spread any distinct border of prophecy; merely thanking the Lord that he should then be under grass. The decay of our glory was to be edged with blood: Jonathan admitted that there would be stuff in the fallen race to deliver a sturdy fight before they went to their doom.

For this prodigious curse, England had to thank young Robert, the erratic son of Jonathan.

It was now two years since Robert had inherited a small legacy of money from an aunt,

and spent it in waste, as the farmer bitterly supposed. He was looking at some immense seed-melons in his garden, lying about in morning sunshine—a new feed for sheep, of his own invention,—when the call of the wanderer saluted his ears, and he beheld his son Robert at the gate.

"Here I am, Sir," Robert sung out from the exterior.

"Stay there, then," was his welcome.

They were alike in their build and in their manner of speech. The accost and the reply sounded like reports from the same pistol. The old man was tall, broad-shouldered, and muscular —a grey edition of the son, upon whose disorderly attire he cast a glance, while speaking, with settled disgust. Robert's necktie streamed loose; his hair was uncombed; a handkerchief dangled from his pocket. He had the look of the prodigal, returned with impudence for his portion instead of repentance.

"I can't see how you are, Sir, from this distance," said Robert, boldly assuming his privilege to enter.

"Are you drunk?" Jonathan asked, as Robert marched up to him.

"Give me your hand, Sir."

"Give me an answer first. Are you drunk?"

Robert tried to force the complacent aspect of a mind unabashed, but felt that he made a stupid show before that clear-headed, virtuously-living old man of iron nerves. The alternative to flying into a passion, was the looking like a fool.

"Come, father," he said, with a miserable snigger, like a yokel's smile; "here I am at last. I don't say, kill the fatted calf, and take a lesson from Scripture, but give me your hand. I've done no man harm but myself—damned if I've done a mean thing anywhere! and there's no shame to you in shaking your son's hand after a long absence."

Jonathan Eccles kept both hands firmly in his pockets.

"*Are* you drunk?" he repeated.

Robert controlled himself to answer, "I'm not."

"Well, then, just tell me when you were drunk last."

"This is a pleasant fatherly greeting!" Robert interjected.

"You get no good by fighting shy of a simple question, Mr. Bob," said Jonathan.

Robert cried querulously, "I don't want to fight shy of a simple question."

"Well, then; when were you drunk last? answer me that."

"Last night."

Jonathan drew his hand from his pocket to thump his leg.

"I'd have sworn it!"

All Robert's assurance had vanished in a minute, and he stood like a convicted culprit before his father.

"You know, sir, I don't tell lies. I *was* drunk last night. I couldn't help it."

"No more could the little boy."

"I was drunk last night. Say, I'm a beast."

"I shan't!" exclaimed Jonathan, making his voice sound as a defence to this vile charge against the brutish character.

"Say, I'm worse than a beast, then," cried Robert, in exasperation. "Take my word that

it hasn't happened to me to be in that state for a year and more. Last night I was mad. I can't give you any reasons. I thought I was cured; but I've trouble in my mind, and a tide swims you over the shallows—so I felt. Come, sir—father, don't make me mad again."

"Where did you get the liquor?" inquired Jonathan.

"I drank at 'The Pilot.'"

"Ha! there's talk there of 'that damned old Eccles' for a month to come—'the unnatural parent.' How long have you been down here?"

"Eight and twenty hours."

"Eight and twenty hours. When are you going?"

"I want lodging for a night."

"What else?"

"The loan of a horse that'll take a fence."

"Go on."

"And twenty pounds."

"Oh!" went Jonathan. "If farming came as easy to you as face, you'd be a prime agriculturalist. Just what I thought! What's be-

come of that money your aunt Jane was fool enough to bequeath to you?"

"I've spent it."

"Are you a Deserter?"

For a moment Robert stood as if listening, and then white grew his face, and he swayed and struck his hands together. His recent intoxication had unmanned him.

"Go in—go in," said his father in some concern, though wrath was predominant.

"Oh, make your mind quiet about me." Robert dropped his arms. "I'm weakened somehow—damned weak, I am—I feel like a woman when my father asks me if I've been guilty of villany. Desert? I wouldn't desert from the hulks. Hear the worst, and this *is* the worst: I've got no money—I don't owe a penny, but I've haven't got one."

"And I won't give you one," Jonathan appended; and they stood facing one another in silence.

A squeaky voice was heard from the other side of the garden hedge of clipped yew.

"Hi! farmer, is that the missing young man?" and presently a neighbour, by name John Sedgett, came trotting through the gate, and up the garden path.

"I say," he remarked, "here's a rumpus. Here's a bobbery up at Fairly. Oh! Bob Eccles! Bob Eccles! At it again!"

Mr. Sedgett shook his wallet of gossip with an enjoying chuckle. He was a thin-faced creature, rheumy of eye, and drawing his breath as from a well; the ferret of the village for all underlying scandal and tattle, whose sole humanity was what he called pitifully 'a peakin' at his chest, and who had retired from his business of grocer in the village upon the fortune brought to him in the energy and capacity of a third wife to conduct affairs, while he wandered up and down and knitted people together—an estimable office in a land where your house is so grievously your castle.

"What the devil have you got in you now?" Jonathan cried out to him.

Mr. Sedgett was seized by his complaint and

demanded commiseration, but recovering, he chuckled again.

"Oh, Bob Eccles! Don't you never grow older? And the first day down among us again, too. Why, Bob, as a military man, you ought to acknowledge your superiors. Why, Stephen Bilton, the huntsman, says, Bob, you pulled the young gentleman off his horse—you on foot, and him mounted. I'd ha' given pounds to be there. And ladies present! Lord help us! I'm glad you're returned, though. These melons of the farmer's, they're a wonderful invention; people are speaking of 'em right and left, and says, says they, Farmer Eccles, he's best farmer going—Hampshire ought to be proud of him—he's worth two of any others—that they are fine ones. And you're come back to keep 'em up, eh, Bob? Are ye, though, my man?"

"Well, here I am, Mr. Sedgett," said Robert, "and talking to my father."

"Oh! I wouldn't be here to interrupt ye for the world." Mr. Sedgett made a show of retiring, but Jonathan insisted upon his dis-

burdening himself of his tale, saying: "Damn your raw beginnings, Sedgett! What's been up? Nobody can hurt me."

"That they can't, neighbour; nor Bob neither, as far as stand-up man to man go. I give him three to one—Bob Eccles! He took 'em when a boy. He may you know, he may have the law agin him, and by Gearge! if he do—why, a man's no match for the law. No use bein' a hero to the law. The law masters every man alive; and there's law in everything, neighbour Eccles; eh, sir? Your friend, the Prince, owns to it, as much as you or me. But, of course, you know what Bob's been doing. What I dropped in to ask was, why did ye do it, Bob? Why pull the young gentleman off his horse? I'd ha' given pounds to be there!"

"Pounds o' tallow candles don't amount *to* much," quoth Robert.

"That's awful bad brandy at the 'Pilot,'" said Mr. Sedgett, venomously.

"Were you drunk when you committed this assault?" Jonathan asked his son.

"I drank afterwards," Robert replied.

"'Pilot' brandy's poor consolation," remarked Mr. Sedgett.

Jonathan had half a mind to turn his son out of the gate, but the presence of Sedgett advised him that his doings were naked to the world.

"You kicked up a shindy in the hunting-field—what about? Who mounted ye?"

Robert remarked that he had been on foot.

"On foot—eh? on foot!" Jonathan speculated, unable to realize the image of his son as a foot-man in the hunting-field, or to comprehend the insolence of a pedestrian who should dare to attack a mounted huntsman. "You were on foot? The devil you were on foot! Foot? And caught a man out of his saddle?"

Jonathan gave up the puzzle. He laid out his forefinger decisively :—

"If it's an assault, mind, you stand damages. My land gives and my land takes my money, and no drunken dog lives on the produce.

A row in the hunting-field's un-English, I call it."

"So it is, sir," said Robert.

"So it be, neighbour," said Mr. Sedgett.

Whereupon Robert took his arm, and holding the scraggy wretch forward, commanded him to out with what he knew.

"Oh, I don't know no more than what I've told you." Mr. Sedgett twisted a feeble remonstrance of his bones that were chiefly his being at the gripe; "except that you got hold the horse by the bridle, and wouldn't let him go, because the young gentleman wouldn't speak as a gentleman, and—oh! don't squeeze so hard:——"

"Out with it!" cried Robert.

"And you said, Steeve Bolton said, you said—'Where is she?' you said, and he swore, and you swore, and a lady rode up, and you pulled, and she sang out, and off went the gentleman, and Steeve said she said, 'For shame.'"

"And it was the truest word spoken that day!" Robert released him. "You don't know

much, Mr. Sedgett; but it's enough to make me explain the case to my father, and, with your leave, I'll do so."

Mr. Sedgett remarked: "By all means, do;" and rather preferred that his wits should be accused of want of brightness, than that he should miss a chance of hearing the rich history of the scandal and its origin. Something stronger than a hint sent him off at a trot, hugging in his elbows.

"The postman won't do his business quicker than Sedgett 'll tap this tale upon every door in the parish," said Jonathan.

"I can only say I'm sorry, for your sake;" Robert was expressing his contrition, when his father caught him up:

"Who can hurt me?—*my* sake? Have I got the habits of a sot?—what you'd call 'a beast!' but I know the ways o' beasts, and if you did too, you wouldn't bring them in to bear your beastly sins. Who can hurt me?—You've been quarrelling with this young gentleman about a woman—did you damage him?"

"If knuckles could do it, I should have brained him, sir," said Robert.

"You struck him, and you got the best of it?"

"He got the worst of it any way, and will again."

"Then the devil take you for a fool! why did you go and drink? I could understand it if you got licked. Drown your memory then, if that filthy soaking's to your taste; but why, when you get the prize, we'll say, you go off headlong into a manure pond?—there! except that you're a damned idiot!" Jonathan struck the air, as to observe that it beat him, but for the foregoing elucidation: thundering afresh, "Why did you go and drink?"

"I went, Sir, I went—why did I go?" Robert slapped his hand despairingly to his forehead. "What on earth did I go for?—because I'm at sea, I suppose. Nobody cares for me. I'm at sea, and no rudder to steer me. I suppose that's it. So, I drank. I thought it best to take spirits on board. No; this was the reason—I remember: that lady, whoever she was, said something that stung me. I held the fellow under her eyes,

and shook him, though she was begging me to let him off. Says she—but I've drunk it clean out of my mind."

"There, go in and look at yourself in the glass," said Jonathan.

"Give me your hand first,"—Robert put his own out humbly.

"I'll be hanged if I do," said Jonathan firmly. "Bed and board you shall have while I'm alive, and a glass to look at yourself in; but my hand's for decent beasts. Move one way or t'other: take your choice."

Seeing Robert hesitate, he added, "I shall have a damned deal more respect for you if you toddle." He waved his hand away from the premises.

"I'm sorry you've taken so to swearing of late, Sir," said Robert.

"Two flints strike fire, my lad. When you keep distant, I'm quiet enough in my talk to satisfy your aunt Anne."

"Look here, Sir; I want to make use of you, so I'll go in."

"Of course you do," returned Jonathan, not

a whit displeased by his son's bluntness; "what else is a father good for? I let you know the limit, and that's a brick wall; jump it, if you can. Don't fancy it's your aunt Jane you're going in to meet."

Robert had never been a favourite with his aunt Anne, who was Jonathan's housekeeper.

"No, poor old soul! and may God bless her in heaven!" he cried.

"For leaving you what you turned into a thundering lot of liquor to consume—eh?"

"For doing all in her power to make a man of me; and she was close on it—kind, good old darling, that she was! She got me with that money of hers to the best footing I've been on yet—bless her heart, or her memory, or whatever a poor devil on earth may bless an angel for! But here I am."

The fever in Robert blazed out under a pressure of extinguishing tears.

"There, go along in," said Jonathan, who considered drunkenness to be the main source of water in a man's eyes. "It's my belief you've been at it already this morning."

Robert passed into the house in advance of his father, whom he quite understood and appreciated. There was plenty of paternal love for him, and a hearty smack of the hand, and the inheritance of the farm, when he turned into the right way. Meantime Jonathan was ready to fulfil his parental responsibility, by sheltering, feeding, and not publicly abusing his offspring, of whose spirit he would have had a higher opinion if Robert had preferred, since he must go to the deuce, to go without troubling any of his relatives; as it was, Jonathan submitted to the infliction gravely. Neither in speech nor in tone did he solicit from the severe maiden, known as Aunt Anne, that snub for the wanderer whom he introduced, which, when two are agreed upon the infamous character of a third, through whom they are suffering, it is always agreeable to hear. He said, "Here, Anne; here's Robert. He hasn't breakfasted."

"He likes his cold bath beforehand," said Robert, presenting his cheek to the fleshless, semi-transparent woman.

Aunt Anne divided her lips to pronounce a crisp,

subdued "Ow!" to Jonathan after inspecting Robert; and she shuddered at sight of Robert, and said "Ow!" repeatedly, by way of an interjectory token of comprehension, to all that was uttered; but it was a horrified "No!" when Robert's cheek pushed nearer.

"Then, see to getting some breakfast for him," said Jonathan. "You're not anyway bound to kiss a drunken ——."

"Dog's the word, sir," Robert helped him. "Dogs can afford it. I never saw one in that state; so they don't lose character."

He spoke lightly, but dejection was in his attitude. When his aunt Anne had left the room, he exclaimed:

"By jingo! women make you feel it, by some way that they have. She's a religious creature. She smells the devil in me."

"More like, the brandy," his father responded.

"Well! I'm on the road: I'm on the road!" Robert fetched a sigh.

"I didn't make the road," said his father.

"No, sir; you didn't. Work hard: sleep sound: that's happiness. I've known it for a

year. You're the man I'd imitate, if I could. The devil came first: the brandy's secondary. I was quiet so long. I thought myself a safe man."

He sat down and sent his hair distraught with an effort at smoothing it.

"Women brought the devil into the world first. It's women who raise the devil in us, and why they ——— ?"

He thumped the table just as his Aunt Anne was preparing to spread the cloth.

"Don't be frightened, woman," said Jonathan, seeing her start fearfully back. "You take too many cups of tea, morning and night—hang the stuff!"

"Never, never till now have you abused me, Jonathan," she whimpered, severely.

"I don't tell you to love him; but wait on him. That's all. And I'll about my business. Land and beasts—they *answer* to you."

Robert looked up.

"Land and beasts! They sound like blessed things. When next I go to Church, I shall

know what old Adam felt. Go along, sir. I shall break nothing in the house."

"You won't go, Jonathan?" begged the trembling spinster.

"Give him some of your tea, and strong, and as much of it as he can take—he wants bringing down," was Jonathan's answer; and casting a glance at one of the framed letters, he strode through the doorway, and Aunt Anne was alone with the flushed face and hurried eyes of her nephew, who was to her little better than a demon in the flesh. But there was a Bible in the room.

An hour later, Robert was mounted and riding to the meet of hounds.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN ASSEMBLY AT THE PILOT INN.

A SINGLE night at the Pilot Inn had given life and vigour to Robert's old reputation in Warbeach village, as the stoutest of drinkers and dear rascals throughout a sailor-breeding district, where Dibdin was still thundered in the ale-house, and manhood in a great degree measured by the capacity to take liquor on board as a ship takes ballast. There was a profound affectation of deploring the sad fact that he drank as hard as ever, among the men, and genuine pity expressed for him by the women of Warbeach; but his fame was fresh again. As the spring brings back its flowers, Robert's presence revived his youthful deeds. There had not been a boxer in the neighbourhood like Robert Eccles, nor such a champion in all games, nor, when he set himself to it, such an invincible

drinker. It was he who thrashed the brute, Nic Sedgett, for stabbing with his clasp-knife Harry Boulby, son of the landlady of the Pilot Inn; thrashed him publicly, to the comfort of all Warbeach. He had rescued old Dame Garble from her burning cottage, and made his father house the old creature, and worked at farming, though he hated it, to pay for her subsistence. He vindicated the honour of Warbeach by drinking a match against a Yorkshire skipper till four o'clock in the morning, when it was a gallant sight, my boys, to see Hampshire steadying the defeated north-countryman on his astonished zig-zag to his flat-bottomed vessel, all in the cheery sunrise on the river—yo-ho! ahoy!

Glorious Robert had tried, first the sea, and then soldiering. Now let us hope he'll settle to farming, and follow his rare old father's ways, and be back among his own people for good. So chimed the younger ones, and many of the elder.

Danish blood had settled round Warbeach. To be a really popular hero anywhere in Britain, a

lad must still, I fear, have something of a Scandinavian gullet; and if, in addition to his being a powerful drinker, he is pleasant in his cups, and can sing, and forgive, be free-handed, and roll out the grand risky phrases of a fired brain, he stamps himself, in the apprehension of his associates, a king.

Much of the stuff was required to deal King Robert of Warbeach the capital stroke, and commonly he could hold on till a puff of cold air from the outer door, like an admonitory messenger, reminded him that he was, in the greatness of his soul, a king of swine; after which his way of walking off, without a word to anybody, hoisting his whole stature, while others were staggering, or roaring foul rhymes, or feeling consciously mortal in their sensation of feverishness, became a theme for admiration: ay, and he was fresh as an orchard apple in the morning! there lay his commandership convincingly. What was proved overnight was confirmed at dawn.

Mr. Robert had his contrast in Sedgett's son,

Nicodemus Sedgett, whose unlucky Christian name had assisted the wits of Warbeach in bestowing on him a darkly-luminous relationship. Young Nic loved also to steep his spirit in the bowl; but, in addition to his never paying for his luxury, he drank as if in emulation of the colour of his reputed patron, and neighbourhood to Nic Sedgett was not liked when that young man became thoughtful over his glass.

The episode of his stabbing the landlady's son Harry clung to him fatally. The wound was in the thigh, and nothing serious. Harry was up and off to sea before Nic had ceased to show the marks of Robert's vengeance upon him; but bloodshedding, even on a small scale, is so detested by Englishmen, that Nic never got back to his right hue in the eyes of Warbeach. None felt to him as to a countryman, and it may be supposed that his face was seen no more in the house of gathering, the Pilot Inn.

He rented one of the Fairly farms, known as the Three-Tree Farm, subsisting there, men fancied, by the aid of his housekeeper's money. For he was of those evil fellows who disconcert

all righteous prophecy, and it was vain for Mrs. Boulby and Warbeach village to declare that no good could come to him, when Fortune manifestly kept him going.

He possessed the rogue's most serviceable art: in spite of a countenance that was not attractive, this fellow could, as was proved by evidence, make himself pleasing to women. "The truth of it is," said Mrs. Boulby, at a loss for any other explanation, and with a woman's love of sharp generalization, "it's because my sex is fools."

He had one day no money to pay his rent, and forthwith (using for the purpose his last five shillings, it was said) advertised for a housekeeper; and before Warbeach had done chuckling over his folly, an agreeable woman of about thirty-five was making purchases in his name; she made tea, and the evening brew for such friends as he could collect, and apparently paid his rent for him, after a time; the distress was not in the house three days. It seemed to Warbeach an erratic proceeding on the part of Providence, that Nic should ever be helped

to swim; but our modern prophets have small patience, and summon Destiny to strike without a preparation of her weapons or a warning to the victim.

More than Robert's old occasional vice was at the bottom of his popularity, as I need not say. Let those who generalize upon ethnology determine whether the ancient opposition of Saxon and Norman be at an end; but it is certain, to my thinking, that when a hero of the people can be got from the common popular stock, he is doubly dear. A gentleman, however gallant and familiar, will hardly ever be as much beloved, until he dies to inform a legend or a ballad: seeing that death only can remove the peculiar distinctions and distances which the people feel to exist between themselves and the gentleman-class, and which, not to credit them with preternatural discernment, they are carefully taught to feel. Dead Britons are all Britons, but live Britons are not quite brothers.

It was as the son of a yeoman, showing comprehensible accomplishments, that Robert took his lead. He was a very brave, a sweet-hearted, and

a handsome young man, and he had very chivalrous views of life that were understood by a sufficient number under the influence of ale or brandy, and by a few in default of that material aid; and they had a family pride in him. The pride was mixed with fear that threw over it a tender light, like a mother's dream of her child. The people, I have said, are not so lost in self-contempt as to undervalue their best men, but it must be admitted that they rarely produce young fellows wearing the undeniable chieftain's stamp, and the rarity of one like Robert lent a hue of sadness to him in their thoughts.

Fortune, moreover, the favourer of Nic Sedgett, blew foul whichever the way Robert set his sails. He would not look to his own advantage; and the belief that man should set his little traps for the liberal hand of his God, if he wishes to prosper, rather than strive to be merely honourable in his Maker's eye, is almost as general among poor people as it is with the moneyed classes, who survey them from their height.

When jolly Butcher Billing, who was one of the limited company which had sat with Robert

at the 'Pilot' last night, reported that he had quitted the army, he was hearkened to dolefully, and the feeling was universal that glorious Robert had cut himself off from his pension and his hospital.

But when gossip Sedgett went his rounds, telling that Robert was down among them again upon the darkest expedition their minds could conceive, and rode out every morning for the purpose of encountering one of the gentlemen up at Fairly, and had already pulled him off his horse and laid him in the mud, calling him scoundrel and challenging him either to yield his secret or to fight, and that he followed him, and was out after him publicly, and matched himself against that gentleman, who had all the other gentlemen, and the earl, and the law to back him, the little place buzzed with wonder and alarm. Faint hearts declared that Robert was now done for. All felt that he had gone miles beyond the mark. Those were the misty days when fogs rolled up the salt river from the winter sea, and the sun lived but an hour in the clotted sky, extinguished near the noon.

Robert was seen riding out, and the tramp of his horse was heard as he returned homewards. He called no more at the 'Pilot.' Darkness and mystery enveloped him. There were nightly meetings under Mrs. Boulby's roof, in the belief that he could not withstand her temptations; nor did she imprudently discourage them; but the woman at last overcame the landlady within her, and she wailed: "He wont come because of the drink. Oh! why was I made to sell liquor, which he says sends him to the devil, poor blessed boy? and I can't help begging him to take one little drop. I did, the first night he was down, forgetting his ways; he looked so desperate, he did, and it went on and went on, till he was primed, and me proud to see him get out of his misery. And now he hates the thought of me."

In her despair she encouraged Sedgett to visit her bar and parlour, and he became everywhere a most important man.

Farmer Eccles's habits of seclusion (his pride, some said), and more especially the dreaded austere Aunt Anne, who ruled that household,

kept people distant from the Warbeach farm-house, all excepting Sedgett, who related that every night on his return, she read a chapter from the Bible to Robert, sitting up for him patiently to fulfil this duty; and that the farmer's words to his son had been: "Rest here; eat and drink, and ride my horse; but not a penny of my money do you have."

By the help of Steeve Bilton, the Fairly huntsman, Sedgett was enabled to relate that there was a combination of the gentlemen against Robert, whose behaviour none could absolutely approve, save the landlady and jolly Butcher Billing, who stuck to him with a hearty, blind faith.

"Did he ever," asked the latter, "did Bob Eccles ever conduct himself disrespectful to his superiors? Wasn't he always found out at his wildest for to be right—to a sensible man's way of thinking?—though not, I grant ye, to his own interests—there's another tale." And Mr. Billing's staunch adherence to the hero of the village was cried out to his credit when Sedgett

stated, on Stephen Bilton's authority, that Robert's errand was the defence of a girl who had been wronged, and whose whereabouts, that she might be restored to her parents, was all he wanted to know. This story passed from mouth to mouth, receiving much ornament in the passage. The girl in question became a lady; for it is required of a mere common girl that she should display remarkable character before she can be accepted as the fitting companion of a popular hero. She became a young lady of fortune, in love with Robert, and concealed by the artifice of the offending gentleman whom Robert had challenged. Sedgett told this for truth, being instigated to boldness of invention by pertinacious inquiries, and the dignified sense that the whole story hung upon him.

Mrs. Boulby, who as a towering woman despised Sedgett's weak frame, had been willing to listen till she perceived him to be but a man of fiction, and then she gave him a flat contradiction, having no esteem for his custom.

"Eh! but, Missis, I can tell you his name—

the gentleman's name," said Sedgett, placably. "He's a Mr. Algernon Blancove, and a cousin by marriage, or something, of Mrs. Lovell."

"I reckon you're right about that, goodman," replied Mrs. Boulby, with intuitive discernment of the true from the false, mingled with a desire to show that she was under no obligation for the news. "All t'other's a tale of your own, and you know it, and no more true than your rigmaroles about my brandy, which is French; it is, as sure as my blood's British."

"Oh! Missis," quoth Sedgett, maliciously, "as to tales, you've got witnesses enough it crassed chann'l. Aha! Don't bring 'em into the box. Don't you bring 'em into ne'er a box."

"You mean to say, Mr. Sedgett, they wont swear?"

"No, missis; they'll swear, fast and safe, if you teach 'em. Dashed if they wont run the 'Pilot' on a rock with their swearin'. It ain't a good habit."

"Well, Mr. Sedgett, the next time you drink

my brandy and find the consequences bad, you let me hear of it."

"And what'll you do, Missis, may be?"

Listeners were by, and Mrs. Boulby cruelly retorted: "I won't send you home to your wife;" which created a roar against this hen-pecked man.

"As to consequences, Missis, it's for your sake I'm looking at *them*," Sedgett said, when he had recovered from the blow.

"You say that to the excise, Mr. Sedgett; it, belike, 'll make 'em sorry."

"Brandy's your weak point, it appears, Missis."

"A little in you would stiffen your back, Mr. Sedgett."

"Poor Bob Eccles didn't want no stiffening when he come down first," Sedgett interjected.

At which, flushing enraged, Mrs. Boulby cried: "Mention him, indeed! And him and you, and that son of your'n—the shame of your cheeks if people say he's like his father. Is it your son, Nic Sedgett, thinks to inform against me, as once he swore to, and to get his wage that

he may step out of a second bankruptcy?—and *he* a farmer! You let him know that he isn't feared by me, Sedgett, and there's one here to give him a second dose, without waiting for him to use clasp-knives on harmless innocents."

"Pacify yourself, ma'am, pacify yourself," remarked Sedgett, hardened against words abroad by his endurance of blows at home. "Bob Eccles, he's got his hands full, and he, may be, 'll reach the hulks before my Nic do, yet. And how 'm I answerable for Nic, I ask you?"

"More luck to you not to be, I say; and either, Sedgett, you does woman's work, gossipin' about like a cracked bell-clapper, or men's, the biggest gossips of all, which I believe; for there's no beating you at your work, and one can't wish ill to you, knowing what you catch."

"In a friendly way, Missis,"—Sedgett fixed on the compliment to his power of propagating news—"in a friendly way. You can't accuse me of leavin' out the 'l' in your name, now, can you? I make that observation,"—the venomous tattler screwed himself up to the widow insinuatingly, as if her understanding could only be

seized at close quarters,—"I make that observation, because poor Dick Boulby, your lamented husband—eh! poor Dick! You see, Missis, it ain't the tough ones last longest: he'd sing, *'I'm a Sea-Booby,'* to the song, *'I'm a green Mermaid:'* poor Dick! *'a-shinin' upon the sea deeps.'* He kept the liquor from his head, but didn't mean it to stop down in his leg."

"Have you done, Mr. Sedgett?" said the widow, blandly.

"You ain't angry, Missis?"

"Not a bit, Mr. Sedgett; and if I knock you over with the flat o' my hand, don't you think so."

Sedgett threw up the wizened skin of his forehead, and retreated from the bar. At a safe distance, he called: "Bad news that about Bob Eccles swallowing a blow yesterday!"

Mrs. Boulby faced him complacently till he retired, and then observed to those of his sex surrounding her, "Don't 'woman-and-dog-and-walnut-tree' me! Some of you men 'd be the better for a drubbing every day of your lives. Sedgett yond' 'd be as big a villain as his son, only for what he gets at home."

That was her way of replying to the Parthian arrow; but the barb was poisoned. The village was at fever heat concerning Robert, and this assertion that he had swallowed a blow, produced almost as great a consternation as if a fleet of the enemy had been reported off Sandy Point.

Mrs. Boulby went into her parlour and wrote a letter to Robert, which she despatched by one of the loungers about the bar, who brought back news, that three of the gentlemen of Fairly were on horseback, talking to Farmer Eccles at his garden gate. Affairs were waxing hot. The gentlemen had only to threaten Farmer Eccles, to make him side with his son, right or wrong. In the evening, Stephen Bilton, the huntsman, presented himself at the door of the long parlour of the 'Pilot,' and loud cheers were his greeting from a full company.

"Gentlemen all," said Stephen, with dapper modesty; and acted as if no excitement were current, and he had nothing to tell.

"Well, Steeve?" said one, to encourage him.

"How about Bob, to-day?" said another.

Before Stephen had spoken, it was clear to the apprehension of the whole room that he did not share the popular view of Robert. He declined to understand who was meant by 'Bob.' He played the questions off; and then shrugged, with, "Oh, let's have a quiet evening."

It ended in his saying, "About Bob Eccles? There, that's summed up pretty quick—he's mad."

"Mad!" shouted Warbeach.

"That's a lie," said Mrs. Boulby, from the doorway.

"Well, mum, I let a lady have her own opinion." Stephen nodded to her. "There ain't a doubt as t' what the doctors 'd bring him in. I ain't speaking my ideas alone. It's written like the capital letters in a newspaper. Lunatic's the word! And I'll take a glass of something warm, Mrs. Boulby. We had a stiff run to-day."

"Where did ye kill, Steeve?" asked a dispirited voice.

"We didn't kill at all: he was one of those 'long shore dog foxes, and got away home on the cliff." Stephen thumped his knee. "It's

my belief the smell o' sea gives 'em extra cunning."

"The beggar seems to have put ye out rether —ch, Steeve?"

So it was generally presumed: and yet the charge of madness was very staggering; madness being, in the first place, indefensible, and everybody's enemy when at large; and Robert's behaviour looking extremely like it. It had already been as a black shadow haunting enthusiastic minds in the village, and there fell a short silence, during which Stephen made his preparations for filling and lighting a pipe.

"Come; how do you make out he's mad?"

Jolly Butcher Billing spoke; but with none of the irony of confidence.

"Oh!" Stephen merely clapped both elbows against his sides.

Several pairs of eyes were studying him. He glanced over them in turn, and commenced leisurely the puff contemplative.

"Don't happen to have a grudge of e'er a kind against old Bob, Steeve?"

"Not I!"

Mrs. Boulby herself brought his glass to Stephen, and, retreating, left the parlour-door open.

"What causes you for to think him mad, Steeve?"

A second "Oh!" as from the heights dominating argument, sounded from Stephen's throat, half like a grunt. This time he condescended to add:

"How do you know when a dog's gone mad? Well, Robert Eccles, he's gone in like manner. If you don't judge a man by his actions, you've got no means of reckoning. He comes and attacks gentlemen, and swears he'll go on doing it."

"Well, and what does that prove?" said jolly Butcher Billing.

Mr. William Moody, boat-builder, a liver-complexioned citizen, undertook to reply.

"What does that prove? What does that prove when the midshipmite was found with his head in the mixed-pickle jar? It proved that his head was lean, and t' other part was rounder."

The illustration appeared forcible, but not direct, and nothing more was understood from it

than that Moody, and two or three others who had been struck by the image of the infatuated young naval officer, were going over to the enemy. The stamp of madness upon Robert's acts certainly saved perplexity, and was the easiest side of the argument. By this time Stephen had finished his glass, and the effect was seen.

"Hang it!" he exclaimed, "I don't agree he deserves shooting. And he *may* have had harm done to him. In that case, let him fight. And I say, too, let the gentleman give him satisfaction."

"Hear! hear!" cried several.

"And if the gentleman refuse to give him satisfaction in a fair stand-up fight, I say he ain't a gentleman, and deserves to be treated as such. My objection's personal. I don't like any man who spoils sport, and ne'er a rascally vulpeci' spoils sport as he do, since he's been down in our parts again. I'll take another brimmer, Mrs. Boulby."

"To be sure you will, Stephen," said Mrs. Boulby, bending as in a curtsey to the glass; and

so soft with him that foolish fellows thought her cowed by the accusation thrown at her favourite.

"There's two questions about they valpecies, Master Stephen," said Farmer Wainsby, a farmer with a grievance, fixing his elbow on his knee for serious utterance. "There's to ask, and t' ask again. Sport, I grant ye. All in doo season. But," he performed a circle with his pipe stem, and darted it as from the centre thereof towards Stephen's breast, with the poser, "do we s'pport thieves at public expense for them to keep thievin'—black, white, or brown—no matter, eh? Well, then, if the public wunt bear it, dang me if I can see why individles shud bear it. It ent no manner o' reason, net as I can see; let gentlemen have their opinion, or let 'em not. Foxes be hanged!"

Much slow winking was interchanged. In a general sense, Farmer Wainsby's remarks were held to be un-English, though he was pardoned for them as one having peculiar interests at stake.

"Ay, ay! we know all about that," said Stephen, taking succour from the eyes surrounding him.

"And so, may be, do we," said Wainsby.

"Fox-hunting 'll go on when your great-grandfather's your youngest son, farmer; or t' other way."

"I reckon it 'll be a stuffed fox *your* chil'ern 'll hunt, Mr. Steeve; more straw in 'em than bow'ls."

"If the country," Stephen thumped the table, "were what you'd make of it, hang me if my name 'd long be Englishman!"

"Hear, hear, Steeve!" was shouted in support of the Conservative principle enunciated by him.

"What I say is, flesh and blood before foxes!"

Thus did Farmer Wainsby likewise attempt a rallying-cry; but Stephen's retort, "Ain't foxes flesh and blood?" convicted him of clumsiness, and, buoyed on the uproar of cheers, Stephen pursued, "They are; to kill 'em in cold blood's beast-murder, so it is. What do we do? We give 'em a fair field—a fair field and no favour!

We let 'em trust to the instincts Nature, she's given 'em; and don't the old woman know best? If they *can* get away, they win the day. All's open, and honest, and aboveboard. Kill your rats and kill your rabbits, but leave foxes to your betters. Foxes are gentlemen. You don't understand? Be hanged if they ain't! I like the old fox, and I don't like to see him murdered and exterminated, but die the death of a gentleman, at the hands of gentlemen——."

"And ladies," sneered the farmer.

All the room was with Stephen, and would have backed him uproariously, had he not reached his sounding period without knowing it, and thus allowed his opponent to slip in that abominable addition.

"Ay, and ladies," cried the huntsman, keen at recovery. "Why shouldn't they? I hate a field without a woman in it; don't you? and you? and you? And you, too, Mrs. Boulby? There you are, and the room looks better for you —don't it, lads? Hurrah!"

The cheering was now aroused, and Stephen had his glass filled again in triumph, while the

farmer meditated thickly over the ruin of his argument from that fatal effort at fortifying it by throwing a hint to the discredit of the sex, as many another man has meditated before.

"Eh! poor old Bob!" Stephen sighed and sipped. "I can cry that with any of you. It's worse for me to see than for you to hear of him. Wasn't I always a friend of his, and said he was worthy to be a gentleman, many a time? He's got the manners of a gentleman now; offs with his hat, if there's a lady present, and such a neat way of speaking. But there, acting's the thing, and his behaviour's beastly bad! You can't call it no other. There's two Mr. Blancoves up at Fairly, relatives of Mrs. Lovell's—whom I'll take the liberty of calling My Beauty, and no offence meant—and it's before her that Bob only yesterday rode up—one of the gentlemen being Mr. Algernon, free of hand and a good seat in the saddle, t'other's Mr. Edward; but Mr. Algernon, he's Robert Eccles's man—up rides Bob, just as we was tying Mr. Reenard's brush to the pommel of the lady's saddle, down

in Ditley Marsh; and he bows to the lady. Says he—but he's mad, stark mad!"

Stephen resumed his pipe amid a din of disappointment that made the walls ring and the glasses leap.

"A little more sugar, Stephen?" said Mrs. Boulby, moving in lightly from the doorway.

"Thank ye, mum; you're the best hostess that ever breathed."

"So she be; but how about Bob?" cried her guests—some asking whether he carried a pistol or flourished a stick.

"Ne'er a blessed twig, to save his soul; and there's the madness written on him," Stephen roared as loud as any of them. "And me to see him riding in the ring there, and knowing what the gentlemen had sworn to do if he came across the hunt; and feeling that he was in the wrong! I haven't got a oath to swear how mad I was. Fancy yourselves in my place. I love old Bob. I've drunk with him; I owe him obligations from since I was a boy up'ard; I don't know a better than Bob in all England. And there he was:

and says to Mr. Algernon, 'You know what I'm come for.' I never did behold a gentleman so pale-shot all over his cheeks as he was, and pinkish under the eyes; if you've ever noticed a chap laid hands on by detectives in plain clothes. Smack at Bob went Mr. Edward's whip."

"Mr. Algernon's," Stephen was corrected.

"Mr. Edward's, I tell ye—the cousin. And right across the face. My Lord! it made my blood tingle."

A sound like the swish of a whip expressed the sentiments of that assemblage at the 'Pilot.'

"Bob swallowed it?"

"What else could he do, the fool? He had nothing to help him but his hands. Says he, That's a poor way of trying to stop *me*. My business is with this gentleman; and Bob set his horse at Mr. Algernon, and Mrs. Lovell rode across him with her hand raised; and just at that moment up jogged the old gentleman, Squire Blancove, of Wrexby; and Robert Eccles says to him, 'You might have saved your son something by keeping your word.' It appears according to Bob, that the Squire had promised to see his son,

and settle matters. All Mrs. Lovell could do was hardly enough to hold back Mr. Edward from laying out at Bob. He was like a white devil, and speaking calm and polite all the time. Says Bob, I'm willing to take one when I've done with the other; and the squire began talking to his son, Mrs. Lovell to Mr. Edward, and the rest of the gentlemen all round poor dear old Bob, rather bullying-like for my blood; till Bob couldn't help being nettled, and cried out, Gentlemen, I hold him in my power, and I'm silent so long as there's a chance of my getting him to behave like a man with human feelings. If they'd gone at him then, I don't think I could have let him stand alone: an opinion's one thing, but blood's another, and I'm distantly related to Bob; and a man who's always thinking of the value of his place, he ain't worth it. But Mrs. Lovell, she settled the case—a *lady*, Farmer Wainsby, with your leave. There's the good of having a lady present on the field. That's due to a lady!"

"Happen she was at the bottom of it," the farmer returned Stephen's nod grumpily.

"How did it end, Stephen, my lad?" said jolly Butcher Billing, indicating a 'never mind *him*.'

"It ended, my boy, it ended like my glass here—hot and strong stuff, with sugar at the bottom. And I don't see *this*, so glad as I saw *that*, my word of honour on it! Boys all!" Stephen drank the dregs.

Mrs. Boulby was still in attendance. The talk over the circumstances was sweeter than the bare facts, and the replenished glass enabled Stephen to add the picturesque bits of the affray, unspurred by a surrounding eagerness of his listeners—too exciting for imaginative effort. In particular, he dwelt on Robert's dropping the reins and riding with his heels at Algernon, when Mrs. Lovell put her horse in his way, and the pair of horses rose like waves at sea, and both riders showed their horsemanship, and Robert an adroit courtesy, for which the lady thanked him with a bow of her head.

"I got among the hounds, pretending to pacify them, and call 'em together," said Stephen, "and I heard her say—just before all was over,

and he turned off—I heard her say: 'Trust this to me: I will meet you.' I'll swear to them exact words, though there was more, and a 'where' in the bargain, and that I didn't hear. Aha! by George! thinks I, old Bob, you're a lucky beggar, and be hanged if I wouldn't go mad too for a minute or so of short, sweet, private talk with a lovely young widow-lady as ever the sun did shine upon so boldly—oho!

> You've seen a yacht upon the sea,
> She dances and she dances, O!
> As fair is my wild maid to me,

Something about 'prances, O!' on her horse, you know, or you're a hem'd fool if you don't. I never could sing; wish I could! It's the joy of life! It's utterance! Hey for harmony!"

"Eh! brayvo! now you're a man, Steeve! and welcom*er* and welcom*est*; yi—yi, O!" jolly Butcher Billing sung out sharp. "Life wants watering. Here's a health to Robert Eccles, wheresoever and whatsoever! and ne'er a man shall say of me I didn't stick by a friend like Bob. Cheers, my lads!"

Robert's health was drank in a thunder, and

praises of the purity of the brandy followed the grand roar. Mrs. Boulby received her compliments on that head.

"'Pends upon the tide, Missis, don't it?" one remarked, with a grin broad enough to make the slyness written on it easy reading.

"Ah! first a flow and then a ebb," said another.

> "It's many a keg I plant i' the mud,
> Coastguardsman, come! and I'll have your blood!"

Instigation cried, "Cut along;" but the defiant smuggler was deficient in memory, and like Steeve Bilton, was reduced to scatter his concluding rhymes in prose, as 'something about;' whereat jolly Butcher Billing, a reader of songbooks from a literary delight in their contents, scraped his head, and then, as if he had touched a spring, carolled:

> "In spite of all you Gov'ment pack,
> I'll land my kegs of the good Cognyac"—

"though," he took occasion to observe when the chorus and a sort of cracker of irrelevant rhymes had ceased to explode; "though I'm for none of

them games. Honesty!—there's the sugar o' *my* grog."

"Ay, but you like to be cock-sure of the stuff you drink, if e'er a man did," said the boat-builder, whose eye blazed yellow in this frothing season of song and fun.

"Right so, Will Moody!" returned the jolly butcher: "which means—not wrong this time!"

"Then, what's understood by your sticking prongs into your hostess here concerning of her brandy? Here it is—which is enough, except for discontented fellows."

"Eh, missus?" the jolly butcher appealed to her, and pointed at Moody's complexion for proof.

It was quite a fiction that kegs of the good cognac were sown at low water, and reaped at high, near the river-gate of the old Pilot inn garden; but it was greatly to Mrs. Boulby's interest to encourage the delusion which imaged her brandy thus arising straight from the very source, without villanous contact with excisemen and corrupting dealers; and as, perhaps, in her husband's time, the thing had happened, and

still did, at rare intervals, she complacently gathered the profitable fame of her brandy being the best in the district.

"I'm sure I hope you're satisfied, Mr. Billing," she said.

The jolly butcher asked whether Will Moody was satisfied, and Mr. William Moody declaring himself thoroughly satisfied, "then I'm satisfied too!" said the jolly butcher; upon which the boatbuilder heightened the laugh by saying he was not satisfied at all; and to escape from the execrations of the majority, pleaded that it was because his glass was empty: thus making his peace with them. Every glass in the room was filled again.

The young fellows now loosened tongue; and Dick Curtis, the promising cricketer of Hampshire, cried, "Mr. Moody, my hearty! that's your fourth glass, so don't quarrel with me, now!"

"You!" Moody fired up in a bilious frenzy, and called him a this and that and t'other young vagabond; for which the company, feeling the ominous truth contained in Dick Curtis's

remark more than its impertinence, fined Mr. Moody in a song. He gave the—

"So many young Captains have walked o'er my pate,
It's no wonder you see me quite bald, sir,"

with emphatic bitterness, and the company thanked him. Seeing him stand up as to depart, however, a storm of contempt was hurled at him; some said he was like old Sedgett, and was afraid of his wife; and some, that he was like Nic Sedgett, and drank blue.

"You're a bag of blue devils, oh dear! oh dear!"

sang Dick to the tune of "The Campbells are coming."

"I ask e'er a man present," Mr. Moody put out his fist, "is that to be borne? Didn't you," he addressed Dick Curtis, "didn't you sing into my chorus—

'It's no wonder to hear how you squall'd, sir?'

You did!"

"Don't he,"—Dick addressed the company, —"make Mrs. Boulby's brandy look ashamed

of itself in his face? I ask e'er a gentleman present."

Accusation and retort were interchanged, in the course of which, Dick called Mr. Moody, Nic Sedgett's friend; and a sort of criminal inquiry was held. It was proved that Moody had been seen with Nic Sedgett; and then three or four began to say that Nic Sedgett was thick with some of the gentlemen up at Fairly;—just like his luck! Stephen let it be known that he could confirm this fact; he having seen Mr. Algernon Blancove stop Nic on the road and talk to him.

"In that case," said jolly butcher Billing, "there's mischief in a state of fermentation. Did ever anybody see Nic and the devil together?"

"I saw Nic and Mr. Moody together," said Dick Curtis. "Well, I'm only stating a fact," he exclaimed, as Moody rose, apparently to commence an engagement, for which the company quietly prepared, by putting chairs out of his way: but the recreant took his ad-

vantage from the error, and got away to the door, pursued.

"Here's an example of what we lose in having no President," sighed the jolly butcher. "There never was a man built for the chair like Bob Eccles, I say! Our evening's broke up, and I for one, 'd ha' made it morning. Hark, outside; By Gearge! they're snowballing."

An adjournment to the front door brought them in view of a white and silent earth under keen stars, and Dick Curtis and the bilious boatbuilder, foot to foot, snowball in hand. A bout of the smart exercise made Mr. Moody laugh again, and all parted merrily, delivering final shots, as they went their several ways.

"Thanks be to Heaven for snowing," said Mrs. Boulby; "or when I should have got to my bed, Goodness only can tell!" With which, she closed the door upon the empty inn.

END OF VOL. I.

LONDON:
PAVILL AND EDWARDS, PRINTERS, CHANDOS STREET,
COVENT GARDEN.